

## THE SELF-CONCEPT OVER TIME: Research Issues and Directions

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### **Key Words:**

self-evaluation, life course, situational variability

### **Abstract:**

Although theoretical attention has been devoted to the situational variability of the self-concept, empirical investigations continue to rely on one-shot methodologies. Such efforts assume that data obtained through these methods can be generalized to other situations in the person's life, even to subsequent years or stages in the life course. Self-concept is a structural product of reflexive activity, but it is also susceptible to change as the individual encounters new roles, situations, and life transitions. The data reviewed in this paper suggest that: (i) self-evaluation generally becomes more favorable through the life-span; (ii) self-evaluation is represented by a "moving baseline" from which situational fluctuations emerge; (iii) self-concept is characterized by both stability and change over the life course; and (iv) environmental stability plays an important role in self-concept stability. Several avenues of research are recommended to develop an accurate, meaningful, and testable theory of the self-concept over time.

### **Article:**

#### INTRODUCTION

Most researchers view self-concept as a set of structured self-attitudes that is relatively stable and "characteristic" of an individual. While numerous studies have examined structural dimensions of self-concept, very few have focused on temporal aspects of self-concept, i.e. changes in self-concept from one situation to another, from one relationship to another, or from one year or stage in the life course to the next. As a result, little is known about the social conditions responsible for change and stability in self-concept.

This review demonstrates that the dominant structural conceptualization of self-concept and the concomitant failure to study the dynamic, changing, emerging qualities of self-concept, are the products of three related and widespread methodological practices in self-concept research: (i) a preoccupation with one-shot measures of self-esteem, (ii) an overreliance on samples of adolescents and college students, and (iii) the tendency to measure self-esteem in detached classroom and experimental situations.

The objective of this paper is to integrate social psychological, sociological, and developmental research on self-concept. I argue that to understand self-concept we must conceptualize it as a moving baseline with fluctuations across situations (Demo 1985, Savin-Williams & Demo 1983) and life stages. This involves recognizing that the self-concept is simultaneously a complex structure and a process, that it is stable, but that it is also dynamic. I also argue that to capture the dynamic qualities of self-concept it is necessary to obtain repeated measurements and to include naturalistic observations. I move now to a brief review of the evidence that self-concept has both structural and processual qualities, recognizing that this evidence corresponds to two general models used by self-concept researchers and that different points of view exist within each model.

#### THE STRUCTURAL MODEL

Many researchers and theorists view self-concept as a multifaceted structure of thoughts, attitudes, images, schemas, or theories regarding the self as an object (e.g. Carver & Scheier 1981, Cheek & Hogan 1983, Epstein 1980, Greenwald & Pratkanis 1984, Hoelter 1985, Kihlstrom & Cantor 1984, Markus 1983, McGuire & McGuire 1981, Rosenberg 1979). Typically, it is also assumed that self-concept is a configuration of personality characteristics that is relatively stable and generalizable from one situation to the next. This view corresponds to the trait model, widely espoused in personality research and in social psychology, which posits that personality characteristics are stable over time and account for consistencies in behavior across different situations.

The exemplar of contemporary sociological research on the self, Morris Rosenberg (1979) summarizes two decades of research by outlining an elaborate and insightful description of the structure of human self-concept. He specifies "regions" of the self-concept (extant, desired, and presenting selves), each with several specific components. The extant self, for example, is comprised of social identity elements, role-sets, and dispositions, while the desired self consists of an idealized image (fantasies), a committed image (actual goals), and a moral image (what we feel we "should be") or superego. Rosenberg's detailed description provides an excellent understanding of the structure of self-reflection, but it is also a static view on the self that is fixed at one point in time.

Many other investigators have used rigorous factor-analytic procedures to study the cognitive structure of self-concept. As might be expected, psychologists and sociologists conceptualize the structure of self-concept somewhat differently, with psychologists typically describing a system of traits and sociologists describing a structure of roles or identities. Recent advances have led researchers to describe self-concept as a system of schemas or generalizations about the self based on personal experiences and characteristics (Markus & Sents 1982); as an associative memory network storing traits (Bower & Gilligan 1979); as a hierarchical category structure consisting of traits and values (Carver & Scheier 1981, Kihlstrom & Cantor 1984); as an identity salience hierarchy (Serpe 1987, Stryker 1980); or as a multidimensional meaning space (Greenwald & Pratkanis 1984, Hoelter 1985). There is also considerable evidence that the cognitive content and organization of the self varies across individuals (Greenwald & Pratkanis 1984).

## THE PROCESSUAL MODEL

Even casual observers of human behavior recognize the situational shifts and fluctuations, the mild surges and the dramatic plunges, that are typical of an individual's feelings about and attitudes toward oneself. Turner (1968:94) distinguishes between "self-image," which refers to the individual's self-picture at a given moment, and "self-conception," which refers to one's relatively enduring and stable "sense of 'the real me'." Burke (1980:20) suggests viewing the self-image as "the 'current working copy' of the identity. As a 'working' copy, it is subject to constant change, revision, editing, and updating as a function of variations in situation and situational demands." This conceptualization is helpful in that it enables us simultaneously to consider the situationally variable aspects of self-concept (here termed the self-image) and the more lasting, relatively stable and durable self-conception that one carries across relationships, situations, and contexts. Likewise, Markus & her associates (1986, 1987) characterize self-concept as a relatively stable universe of different self-conceptions, and they describe the working self-concept as a temporary subset of situationally relevant self-conceptions, including core self-conceptions (Gergen 1968) or self-schemas. Markus & Wurf (1987:306) assert that "the working self-concept, or the self-concept of the moment, is best viewed as a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge." The problem, however, is that few have attempted to integrate these two views or to study the structure of self-concept as both stable over time and situationally variable.

Research on self-verification processes (Swann 1983, Swann & Hill 1982) suggests an explanation for the seemingly paradoxical findings that self-concept is both stable over long periods of time (e.g. Block 1981, Costa & McCrae 1980) and yet susceptible to change. Swann & Hill (1982) designed an experiment in which individuals who described themselves as either dominant or submissive received feedback from a confederate that either confirmed or refuted their self-conceptions. Subsequent to the feedback, some of the individuals were given an opportunity to interact with the confederate, while others were not. Interestingly, individuals who received discrepant feedback and who had an opportunity to interact with the source of this information,

actively fought the challenge to their self-descriptions. In contrast, individuals receiving discrepant feedback but deprived of further interaction with the confederate experienced considerable change in their self-descriptions.

These and other studies indicate that people monitor their feedback from others (Snyder & Gangsted 1982) and pursue different strategies to verify and sustain their perceptions of themselves. For example, there is evidence that people selectively interact with others who see them as they see themselves (Backman & Secord 1962), actively choose roles (Backman & Secord 1968) and social environments (Pervin 1967) that are consistent with their self-conceptions, selectively attend to self-confirmatory feedback (Swann & Read 1980), and reinterpret, devalue, or dismiss discrepant feedback (Kulik et al 1986, Rosenberg 1979, Swann 1983, Tesser & Campbell 1983). As a result, the self protects itself against change, with even laboratory-induced changes disappearing within a few days (Swann & Hill 1982). Thus, seemingly paradoxical findings may be reconciled in that generalized self-concept is stable over extended periods of time while situation-specific self-images, or working self-concepts, are malleable.

An important task, then, is for researchers to devote greater attention to integrating structural and dynamic perspectives. Traditional theories (reflected appraisals, social comparisons, self-perception) suggest that self-attitudes change, fluctuate, stabilize, revert to an earlier level, and change again. Our lives are lived in constantly changing roles and situations embedded in the course of human development and social change. But as the following section demonstrates, the limitations of prevailing research methodologies have prevented the processual perspective from being systematically applied in empirical research, and consequently little is known about the emergent, dynamic, changing qualities of human self-images.

#### THE PRESUMED STABILITY OF SELF-CONCEPT

It is important to note that self-concept stability and change, as used here, are distinct from what Rosenberg (1979:57) and others define as self-consistency: "the motive to act in accordance with the self-concept and to maintain it intact in the face of potentially challenging evidence." It seems clear that such a motive exists and that individuals need a fairly consistent picture of who they are in order to know how to act in different situations, but attention is being focused here on another dimension of self-concept. We are interested in the nature and degree of change, the modifications and revisions in self-attitudes, the shifting self-evaluations, peaks and valleys in feelings of self-worth, that occur despite the proclivity to see oneself as the same person everyday.

Cheek & Hogan's (1983:256) review indicates "overwhelming empirical evidence for the stability of self-concepts." Unfortunately, three normative methodological practices eliminate sources of variation in self-concept, leading researchers to overstate true stability in self-concept: (i) most studies are cross-sectional and rely on a single measurement; (ii) 90% of studies on the self are studies of a single dimension—self-esteem (McGuire et al 1978)—which may be more stable than other dimensions; and (iii) developmental studies typically assess short-term stability (e.g. one year to the next) among two age groups (adolescents and college students), ignoring long-term patterns across the life course.

A few studies, most designed by developmental psychologists, have followed individuals through adolescence, and others have examined self-concept during the transition from adolescence into early adulthood. Curiously, only indirect attention has been devoted to self-concept at more mature points in the life cycle, e.g. mid-life or old age, and Rossan (1987) proposes that theories of identity development may have only limited relevance for adult identity. Further, studies that have employed a temporal perspective have examined self-concept in a social vacuum, ignoring linkages between changes in the life course and changes in self-concept. The following section reviews the available evidence on self-concept over the life course and presents strategies for studying the self over time, strategies that recognize the structural and processual properties of self-concept and direct attention to the self's ongoing stability and malleability.

#### SELF-CONCEPT THROUGH THE LIFE COURSE

Self-concept, like other dimensions of personality, is a function of interacting biological, developmental, and social processes across the life course. It is acquired through patterns of interaction with others and is modified as children and adults develop new cognitive and intellectual capabilities and confront new social demands and processes.

### *Infancy*

Infants appear to develop a sense of self as subject or causal agent ("I") prior to developing a sense of self as object ("Me") (Harter 1983). Once they acquire the ability to recognize the consequences of their own behavior, to act intentionally, and to distinguish themselves from others in their environment (around 12-15 months), the ongoing relationships they have with parents and significant others are increasingly influential in shaping a preliminary and rudimentary self-schema. The self-schema that emerges between 15 and 24 months is dominated by internal images of one's own physical characteristics (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn 1979), an important advance in establishing a sense of self that is stable and consistent across situations and over time, and an apparent prerequisite for self-evaluative emotions and self-regulation (Lewis et al 1989, Stipek et al 1990).

One limitation to understanding early self-development is reliance on mirror studies of visual self-recognition (Harter 1983). As a result, our knowledge is limited to ontogenetic trends in self-recognition, and we know little about early cognitive-developmental and social processes involved in generating other thoughts and feelings about the self. Many other dimensions of personality (e.g. aggressiveness, submissiveness, shyness) are measured using behavioral observations, but self-concept studies rarely make use of this methodology (Savin-Williams & Jaquish 1981), which seems well-suited for studying the influence of social interaction on early self-development. Theories of the self (psychoanalytic, social learning, symbolic interactionist) emphasize the influence of early parent-child relations, suggesting that greater attention should be devoted to naturalistic studies of parent-child evaluative interactions (Shrauger & Schoeneman 1979).

Studies of child-caretaker relations are also needed as the social context of childhood changes and increasing percentages of young children spend significant amounts of time in day-care settings. A number of studies (mostly of preschoolers) report that quality interactions between caretakers and children are associated with children being positive, intelligent, and sociable (MacKinnon & King 1988). But we do not know how self-concept development varies as a function of day-care variables such as frequency of attendance and quality of interactions, nor do we know how these processes may vary for children of different family and socioeconomic circumstances.

### *Childhood*

Between ages 2 and 4, children's rapidly expanding cognitive abilities enable them to think in symbolic terms, to understand object constancy, and to view themselves as objects. Piaget (1962) labeled this stage preoperational egocentrism, in which children assume that others recognize their inner thoughts and feelings, but they lack the role-taking abilities necessary to distinguish their own thoughts and feelings from those of others. Consequently, the preschooler's emerging sense of self does not include a stable set of self-feelings or self-attitudes, but is limited to one's name, aspects of gender identity, age, body image, possessions, personal characteristics, and favorite activities (Keller et al 1978). These categorical self-descriptions are not constant, however, changing in form and content from one situation to the next. Gender identity, for example, is a process characterized by several stages. Two year olds understand and respond to the label boy or girl in referring to themselves (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn 1979); four year olds use these labels correctly in classifying others and show preferences for gender-appropriate toys and activities; but it is not until age 5 or 6 that children understand that gender is fixed and constant (Marcus & Overton 1978). Thus, the content and structure of self-concept change with each stage of self-development, and within each stage there is evidence of both stability and malleability from one context to another,

What we lack, however, is an understanding of how this developmental progression occurs, of how social and cognitive-developmental processes influence children's developing self-theories in the preoperational years. Understanding these processes should be a high priority, given that lifelong patterns of self-reflection likely are

being formed during these years. The instrumental action of toddlers and preschoolers is structured by only a few clearly understood social roles and, like those of infants, their emerging self-concepts are strongly influenced by interactions with a restricted set of significant others. The limited social environment in which they live, combined with their egocentric point of view, precludes the use of social comparisons (Suls & Mullen 1982). Thus, research should be designed to examine: (i) temporal comparison processes, by observing how children respond to and judge their own actions, accomplishments, and failures, and (ii) reflected appraisals, by observing how influential socializing agents react to children's behavior.

By age 5 or 6, as children enter concrete operations, they regularly judge their positive and negative qualities and possess a fairly coherent, hierarchically organized, core or "baseline" self-concept. Increased cognitive sophistication and improved role-taking abilities enable children to consider the perceived judgments and reactions of numerous others in their expanding social environment, and formal interaction with teachers and peers in age-graded educational settings facilitates social comparisons (Entwisle et al 1987, Suls & Mullen 1982). Suls & Mullen describe social comparisons during middle childhood as indiscriminate because children are generally unable to distinguish between similar others (classmates) and dissimilar others (parents) for purposes of comparison. Further complicating matters is the reality that others are similar and dissimilar on numerous dimensions. Parents, for example, tend to be dissimilar in terms of cognitive abilities and certain physical characteristics (height and weight), but are likely to be similar on social structural characteristics (socioeconomic status and race) and other physical features (skin color). Limited cognitive abilities during middle childhood preclude children from understanding these distinctions, thereby restricting use of reflected appraisals and social comparisons, at least until age 7 or 8 (Ruble et al 1980).

Children are able to judge their own actions, however, and to compare recent performances, abilities, qualities, and physical characteristics with earlier ones (Suls & Mullen 1982). It is likely, therefore, that at this stage self-evaluations and self-attributions of autonomous, efficacious activity, and experiences facilitating the sense of self as an active, causal agent in one's environment, are the most important processes for children's developing self-theories (Entwisle et al 1987, Gecas & Schwalbe 1983). Unfortunately, research and theory have generally ignored self-concept during the transition to full-time schooling (Entwisle et al 1987), and thus we know little about the social processes influencing early self-images.

Later in childhood (ages 9 to 11), advanced inductive reasoning and improved classification abilities enable children to understand multiple causes for behavior. These cognitive advances, combined with the challenges of schoolwork, generate reorganized ways of thinking and refined abilities to compare one's own performances with those of children who are similar on evaluated dimensions. Self-evaluation becomes a salient, lifelong concern during this period, and limited evidence (discussed in the next section) suggests that children's thoughts and feelings about themselves are generally positive as they begin elementary school but are more negative, self-critical, and self-doubting in later childhood.

There are several processes that may explain decreasing self-acceptance during later childhood. First, self-concept is characterized by a social exterior at this stage, meaning that children attach importance to, and judge themselves on, abilities and achievements (Damon & Hart 1982, Rosenberg 1986). Academic performances are of particular concern at this age, and Entwisle et al (1987) argue that negative feedback is prevalent, if not normative, among elementary school teachers. Children's reference groups also change during this period as identification with peers increases and parental influence wanes. Greater reliance on perceived, often negative, evaluations of peers challenges self-concept and stirs self-doubts. It is reasonable, therefore, that self-esteem generally decreases from middle to late childhood.

### *Adolescence*

Researchers generally regard adolescence as a period characterized by considerable biological, social, psychological, and developmental change. Although it is widely understood that these changes occur in broader social, historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Dombusch 1989), there is some debate concerning the proportion of adolescents who are troubled by these changes and the proportion who go through this stage

without tumult (e.g. see Montemayor 1983, Offer et al 1981, Simmons & Blyth 1987). Cognitively, early adolescence (12-15) marks the development of formal operational thought, sophisticated deductive reasoning, and more efficient, diversified information processing. The acquisition of these skills enables adolescents to efficiently test hypotheses about themselves at a time when they are extremely introspective and self-conscious. The structure of self-concept during this developmental period is dominated by a psychological interior of inner thoughts, feelings, attitudes, desires, beliefs, fears, and expectations (Damon & Hart 1982, Rosenberg 1979, 1986).

Disruptions to the ways in which early adolescents view themselves are precipitated by physical and physiological changes that are both dramatic and self-evident (accelerating hormonal production, growth spurts, voice changes, acne). Socially; the transition to junior high school presents a number of challenges, including the adjustments associated with having several teachers, making new friends, and perhaps learning a foreign language (Hirsch & Rankin 1987, Rosenberg 1979, Simmons et al 1979). Furthermore, early adolescents gradually emancipate from parents, parent-adolescent conflict heightens (Montemayor 1983), peer involvement intensifies, and concerns turn to dating and sexual activity. The coterminous and ongoing nature of these processes strikes at the core of self-concept and may generate greater disturbances to self-concept at ages 12 and 13 than at any other point in the life cycle (Simmons et al 1979, Rosenberg 1979:230).

However, with continuing maturation and adjustments to new social roles, physical characteristics, and cognitive abilities, adolescents redefine their self-theories. Issues of ego-identity (Erikson 1959) are resolved in late adolescence, even if only temporarily, as thoughts about the self involve less frequent references to childhood and more frequent references to adulthood. Self-cognitions are reorganized and reintegrated, self-consciousness wanes, stability of self is restored, and levels of self-esteem rise steadily as individuals move through this developmental period (Bachman et al 1978, Demo & Savin-Williams 1983, Dusek & Flaherty 1981, McCarthy & Hoge 1982, Offer et al 1981, O'Malley & Bachman 1983, Savin-Williams & Demo 1984; Simmons & Blyth 1987). Table 1 documents the consistency of the finding that global self-esteem increases through the adolescent years,

McCarthy & Hoge (1982) offer several reasonable explanations for growing self-acceptance during this period: (i) the self-esteem motive may strengthen during this period; (ii) greater self-understanding and more efficient role-taking may facilitate adolescents' abilities to understand and fulfill the

**Table 1** Studies examining developmental trends in self-evaluation across the life-course

Study	Sample Description	Scale	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	Major Findings
Demo and Savin-Williams (1983)	60% black, 40% white sample of male and female, lower, lower-middle, and middle class students enrolled in grades 5–8 in parochial schools	Coopersmith (54 items)	10	157	33.75 <sup>1</sup>	3.55	Self-esteem increases consistently from fifth to eighth grade.
			11	180	32.67	3.84	
			12	232	31.67	4.10	
			13	239	31.15	4.07	
Simmons and Blyth (1987)	Stratified, random sample of Milwaukee public school children in grades 6–10	Rosenberg-Simmons Self-Esteem Scale (6 items)	10	621	3.38	N/A	Self-esteem and self-stability improve significantly from late childhood to early adolescence.
			11	552	3.41		
			13	361	3.86		
			14	314	3.96		
Rosenberg (1979)	Stratified, random sample of Baltimore public school children in grades 3–12	Rosenberg-Simmons Self-Esteem Scale (6 items)	8–11	819	4.0 <sup>2</sup>	N/A	Global feelings of self-esteem decline slightly in early adolescence and then rise significantly in later adolescence.
			12–14	649	3.8		
			15–18	516	4.4		
McCarthy & Hoge (1982)	Roughly half white and half black students in public and parochial schools, ranging from working class to upper-middle class	Rosenberg (10 items)	12	546	2.91	.41	Self-esteem increased significantly over the 1-year period for all 3 cohorts, and the across-cohort pattern suggests systematic developmental growth in self-esteem
			13		3.03	.43	
			14	775	3.07	.42	
			15		3.12	.47	
			16	478	3.11	.45	
17	3.22	.44					
Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston (1978)	Nationally representative sample of males (Youth in Transition Project)	Rosenberg (revised; 10 items)	15	1,622	3.74	.52	Self-esteem levels rose gradually throughout high school and early adult years, increasing one full standard deviation over the eight-year period.
			17	1,501	3.83	.49	
			18	1,492	3.88	.50	
			19	1,408	3.90	.49	
			23	1,594	4.22	.48	
National Longitudinal Surveys (Center for Human Resource Research, 1981)	Nationally representative sample of males and females (NORC cohort of youth)	Rosenberg (10 items)	16	1,539 <sup>3</sup>	3.14	.39	Self-esteem was significantly higher among cohorts of young adults than among adolescents.
			17	1,508	3.22	.40	
			18	1,468	3.25	.40	
			19	1,546	3.29	.41	
			20	1,602	3.28	.42	
			21	1,584	3.32	.41	
O'Malley & Bachman (1983)	Nationally representative sample of males and females (Monitoring the future project) <sup>4</sup>	Rosenberg (4 items)	17 (1976)	113	4.13	.69	Self-esteem rises gradually but significantly during adolescence and during the transition into early adulthood.
			20 (1979)	(wtd.)	4.32	.65	
			17 (1976)	129	4.18	.64	
			21 (1980)	(wtd.)	4.30	.74	
			17 (1977)	134	4.18	.63	
Kanouse et al. (1980)	National sample of males and females, with low-income and minority students oversampled (National Longitudinal Survey-class of 1972)	Rosenberg (4 items)	18	16,582	3.92	.65	Developmental increase in self-esteem during transition to adulthood, scores increasing one-half standard deviation over four-year period.
			19	20,100	4.12	.55	
			20	19,418	4.19	.59	
			22	19,324	4.26	.58	

**Table 1** Studies examining developmental trends in self-evaluation across the life-course

Study	Sample Description	Scale	Age Group	N	Mean	SD	Major Findings
Helson & Moane (1987)	Representative sample of senior class of private women's college	Adjective Check List	27	78	48.64	10.74	Measures of self-regarding attitudes showed impressive stability and more favorable self-regard over time.
			43	78	52.04	10.40	
Morganti et al. (1988)	White, lower-middle and middle class	Monge semantic differential (29 items)	14–16	60	151.90	22.52	General developmental pattern of increasing self-evaluation; two oldest groups had significantly higher self-evaluation than two youngest groups.
			25–34	60	152.01	23.03	
			45–54	60	153.69	22.47	
			60–69	90	159.72	22.51	
			70–79	90	161.63	22.59	
80+	90	160.63	22.61				
Jaquish & Ripple (1981)	White, highly educated, primarily middle class	Coopersmith (54 items)	18–25	70	34.1	6.7	Linear progression in self-esteem until late adulthood; adults aged 26–60 had higher self-esteem than the elderly
			26–39	58	36.5	6.9	
			40–60	51	38.2	5.7	
			61–84	39	31.5	7.1	
Gove, Ortega, & Style (1989)	Stratified probability sample of adults aged 18 and older in the U.S.	Rosenberg (8 items)	18–25	408	6.48 <sup>5</sup>	No significant zero-order relationship between age and self-esteem, but after adjusting for income, education, sex, and race, self-esteem is highest among persons aged 75+, lower among those 55–74, followed by those 26–54, and lowest among those 18–25.	
			26–34	397	6.56		
			35–44	392	6.66		
			45–54	355	6.61		
			55–64	275	6.80		
			65–74	253	6.78		
75+	106	7.08					
Nehrke, Hulicka, & Morganti (1980)	Male veterans living in a V.A. Domiciliary	Monge semantic differential (29 items)	50–59	33	151.33 <sup>6</sup>	30.75	Self-evaluation scores increased with age, with the oldest group reporting significantly more favorable self-evaluation than the youngest group
			60–69	33	152.51	34.47	
			70+	33	166.76	21.34	

NOTE: Studies examining short-term change and stability in self-evaluation within one developmental period (e.g., adolescence) and studies examining dimensions other than self-evaluation are not included. I would like to thank Ravenna Helson, Frank Mott, and Milton Nehrke for providing additional data from their studies.

<sup>1</sup>In this study, the Coopersmith scale was coded so that lower scores indicated higher self-esteem.

<sup>2</sup>The average scores reported for these three age groups are median scores; means and standard deviations were not available.

<sup>3</sup>The Ns reported here correspond to the total number of respondents in each age group, so actual Ns for Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (not available) are slightly lower.

<sup>4</sup>A cohort-sequential design was used, involving seven different groups of high school students studied during their senior year and followed up one to four years later. The three groups reported here were included because at least three years separated base-year and follow-up measurements.

<sup>5</sup>These are adjusted means; Gove et al. (1989) also present unadjusted means.

<sup>6</sup>Standard deviations for adjusted scores were not available, so unadjusted means and standard deviations are presented here.

expectations of others; (iii) increased personal autonomy affords adolescents greater latitude to select activities in which they are interested and to delete roles in which their performance is less satisfactory; and (iv) self-esteem may solidify during adolescence and become less susceptible to evaluations by others. In support of the latter explanation, Ellis et al (1980) found that roughly midway through adolescence (10th grade, or about age 16) individuals shifted from evaluating themselves primarily on external standards of achievement to rating themselves primarily on internal standards of personal happiness.

## Adulthood

The transition into adulthood coincides with the emergence of dialectical reasoning, enhanced problem-solving, peak intellectual abilities (Horn & Donaldson 1980, Schaie 1983), and optimal memory (Evans et al 1984). These new skills and abilities enable a broader, more complex self-definition and stronger feelings of self-worth. Although social comparisons with similar others remain the primary mechanism for self-assessment



(Suls & Mullen 1982), these comparisons are not as consequential as during adolescence. The central task at this stage is forging adult identity. Role-identities of student and son or daughter become peripheral as socialization unfolds into new role-identities (spouse, parent, worker) (Gecas & Mortimer 1987).

As Table 1 indicates, the available studies offer compelling evidence that self-evaluation (usually measured as global self-esteem) increases from early adolescence on through the remainder of the life course, Although considerably less research has been conducted on the adult portion of the life course than on earlier periods, a number of studies report increasing self-regard during the important transitions into early adulthood (Bachman et al 1978, Kanouse et al 1980, Offer & Offer 1975, O'Malley & Bachman 1983) and parenthood (Ruble et al 1990),

Only minimal changes in intelligence and memory occur during middle adulthood, or ages 40 to 65 (Baltes et al 1980, Schaie 1983), and problem-solving in real-life situations is optimal (Denney & Palmer 1981). Thus, the cognitive processes shaping self-concept during this period are quite similar to those of young adulthood. A number of social and personal events that typically occur during mid-life elevate consciousness (Nelson & Moane 1987, Neugarten 1968) and trigger a major self-reassessment. Among these events are realization of one's own mortality, relations with adolescent children (Demo et al 1987) and aging parents, deaths of parents and/or close friends, divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily relations.

Again, few studies have examined the influence of these social and developmental processes on self-concept. Research illustrates that job involvement and job satisfaction are highest between ages 40 and 65 (Bray & Howard 1983), and we know that performance in the work setting, occupational conditions, and socioeconomic attainment are tied to personal efficacy and self-esteem (Hughes & Demo 1989, Kohn & Schooler 1983, Rosenberg 1979, Schwalbe 1985). Herzog et al (1982) document that age-related improvements in a number of life domains (housing, community, work) are important in explaining increasing levels of subjective well-being with age. Other studies report increasing self-confidence (Haan 1981), competence (Clausen 1991), and self-esteem (see Table 1) through the middle adult years. But we know more about levels than about processes of self-development during mid-life. Analysts need to study the timing and sequencing of life events (e.g. promotion, divorce, remarriage), the social conditions (e.g. marital and family relations, social support), and developmental processes (e.g. maturation, generativity) that shape self-theories during middle adulthood,

Although social comparisons with similar others remain important during middle age, Suls & Mullen (1982) argue that comparisons with dissimilar others, especially younger coworkers, become increasingly salient and influential. This occurs for two reasons: (i) dissimilar comparisons satisfy the need to feel unique, worthwhile, and special during mid-life reassessment; and (ii) competition in the workplace fosters comparisons with coworkers who may be younger, stronger, quicker, or better educated. In addition, Helson & Moane (1987) observe that coping skills and self-discipline improve during middle age, and Gove et al (1989) report that, compared to younger adults, older adults are better adjusted and more at ease socially. All of these processes should enhance feelings of self-worth.

By late adulthood (around age 65) there is some loss of verbal or fluid intelligence (Schaie 1983), slowing of memory processes (Evans et al 1984), and decline in problem-solving (Denney & Palmer 1981), but these changes tend to be gradual. More dramatic is the shift in social interaction patterns that occurs as social networks change due to retirement and deaths of friends. Old friends are lost, new friends are made, time spent in leisure activities and volunteer work increases, and sense of autonomy increases (Palmore et al 1984). Theory and research on self-concept among the elderly are inadequate and, as a result, it is difficult to explain self-development in the later years. Suls & Mullen (1982) present evidence that social comparisons are less important at this stage due to simple loss of comparison others. Consequently, temporal comparisons predominate, most notably reminiscing or life review (Butler 1963). Reminiscing about past experiences, roles, and selves leads to a reorganized self-concept and may facilitate favorable self-evaluations. Limited evidence (summarized in Table 1) suggests that self-esteem peaks in the late adult years (roughly 65-75), until physical

and cognitive deterioration associated with failing health, less flexibility, limited social interaction and role-identities (Britton & Britton 1972), precipitates negative thoughts and feelings about the self.

This section has concentrated on self-development across the life course as one perspective for researching the self over time. As the next section illustrates, a second perspective views self-evaluation as a "moving baseline" that varies from one social context to the next.

#### SELF-EVALUATION AS A "MOVING BASELINE" THROUGH THE LIFE COURSE

Several recent studies provide evidence that self-evaluation is characterized by a "baseline" view of oneself from which situational variations emerge. Most people view themselves in a fairly consistent manner over extended periods of time but occasionally feel better or worse about themselves than is typically the case. Savin-Williams & Demo (1983) measured "snapshots" of adolescents' self-feelings from one naturalistic situation to the next. Individuals were paged randomly (by a "beeper") wherever they happened to be (school, home, restaurant) for one week. Each time they were signaled they completed a short self-report inventory of their self-feelings (confident, powerful, weak, ashamed) at that moment. Their scores for the entire week were then regressed on one another using time series analyses.

The results indicated that less than one third of the sample could be characterized as having "stable," enduring self-feelings, i.e. positive (or negative) self-descriptions at one moment were followed by positive (or negative) self-descriptions at subsequent measurements. An even smaller group comprising 11% of the sample had "oscillating" self-feelings, that is, a patterned instability in which one self-feeling level would be high, the following one low, the next high, and so forth. This group represents approximately the same percentage of "storm and stress- adolescents reported in other studies (Adelson 1979, Hill 1980, Offer & Offer 1975). The third and largest group (60% of the sample) had self-feelings that fluctuated mildly; they were neither predictably stable nor predictably unstable from one situation to the next. This suggests that for most individuals self-feelings can be represented by a "baseline" or standard self-picture from which situational variations emanate.

Following their panel of adolescents from seventh through tenth grade, Savin-Williams & Demo (1984) found that both "experienced" self-esteem (measured by self-report) and "presented" self-esteem (measured by peers and participant observers) were stable components of self-concept during the supposedly "turbulent" adolescent years. These analyses suggest that while self-concept may exhibit fluctuations from a baseline over short periods of time (e.g. one situation to the next), the basic core structure of self-concept remains fairly stable over longer periods of time.

Recent work in life-span developmental psychology and structural symbolic interactionism supports this conceptualization. A study by Mortimer et al (1982) is particularly informative because several dimensions of self-concept were measured at three points in time: freshman year in college, senior year, and ten years after graduation. Factor analyses of a semantic differential scale identified four dimensions (well-being, sociability, competence, and unconventionality) which exhibited a substantial degree of normative stability over the measurement period; that is, the ordering of individuals on each self-concept dimension remained essentially the same over 14 years spanning college and early adulthood. Further analyses substantiated the four-factor structure at each point in time and revealed a relatively invariant pattern of intercorrelations among the factors at each measurement. They also examined ipsative stability (intraindividual changes in the ordering or salience of particular dimensions) and found that the organization of self-image components was remarkably stable over time. In a similar analysis examining other dimensions of self-concept, Serpe (1987) observes an impressive pattern of stability across five identities relevant to college students: academic roles, athletic/recreational roles, extracurricular roles, friendship roles, and dating roles.

The studies described above, involving naturalistic observation and longitudinal surveys, support the conclusion that self-concept is both stable over long periods of time and situationally variable. I now examine the

contextual and environmental changes that seem to generate fluctuations from a baseline or standard self-concept.

### THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL STABILITY IN SELF-CONCEPT STABILITY

Throughout the life course individuals experience multiple role changes, life transitions, and turning points that are embedded in the course of human development, socialization, and social change. The argument presented here is that applying life-span and life-course perspectives to the study of self-concept will enable researchers to examine the social pathways and life trajectories that facilitate a stable self-concept and the life events and experiences that seem to disrupt self-concept.

The work of Mortimer and her colleagues (1982) supports the conclusion of many investigators that self-concept is stable throughout life, with points of "disturbance" along the way, Cheek & Hogan's (1983:253) review yields a representative conclusion: "rather than being situationally constituted it [self-concept] is the result of a developmental process that begins in childhood and culminates in an internalized character structure that is relatively stable throughout adulthood. . ." (original emphasis), But evidence of stability, continuity, and the important role played by developmental processes should not distract researchers (especially social psychologists) from elucidating the social processes that prompt changes and disruptions in self-concept. Aging and maturation are accompanied by social timetables and by age-graded norms and life events. Age or life stage alone does not account for much variation in self-concept, as Erdwins & Mellinger (1984:394) report in a study of women aged 29-55, but "significant variation does occur among women who have assumed different life roles."

In an important paper on adult development and social theory, Dannefer (1984:107) reminds us of the "uniquely 'open' or 'unfinished' character of the human organism in relation to its environment" and of the identifiable "plasticity [oil characteristics previously assumed to be stable throughout the life course." Dannefer argues that constancy and change in personality are too often assumed to be the results of ontogenetic developmental patterns (e.g. adolescent "turmoil," early adult "growth," and mid-life "crisis") and that such accounts ignore the social organization of development, obscuring the influence of complex social environments.

The research conducted by Mortimer and her collaborators is provocative in this regard. They contend that the stability they observed in self-attitudes from late adolescence into early adulthood is particularly impressive because of the many changes (in marital status, employment, and parenthood) that their panel members experienced over that period. It is plausible, however, that certain environmental changes, particularly normative changes or ones involving success or prestige, may actually facilitate crystallization and stability of self-concept. Early adulthood is a period in the life course when several socially prescribed events occur, many of which involve the acquisition of new roles and statuses (employee, spouse, parent) that may stabilize and socially anchor one's self-concept and enhance feelings of self-worth (Clausen 1991, Ruble et al 1990). During this period a number of self-doubts may be erased, questions about oneself may be answered, and new goals and directions established, resulting in a relatively secure, developmentally mature self-concept. The empirical evidence is sparse, however, suggesting that an important avenue for future research is to explore the hypothesis that "maturation," growth, and stability may be generated by specific and socially prescribed changes in social roles and relationships.

Further, environmental stability may be a function of the life course, with fewer role changes and disruptions in social relationships occurring after early adulthood. Glenn (1980:603) explains that the important role changes that occur during young adulthood cause an intense period of resocialization and restructuring of values and attitudes, after which both geographic and social mobility decline and significant life events are spaced further apart. It is plausible, therefore, that self-concept is more malleable in early adulthood than in subsequent years, owing both to a relatively stable environment in the latter period and to a reliance on established patterns and processes of self-reflection. This view is consistent with Epstein's (1973) assertion that some aspects of personality may solidify over time and become resistant to change (also see Finn 1986, Moss & Susman 1980), but further analyses of self-concept during middle and later adulthood will be required to test this hypothesis. It

is also reasonable to expect unpleasurable and stigmatizing events (divorce, losing a job) to be destabilizing (Baltes et al 1980), shattering one's confidence, disrupting social relationships and routines, and presenting the challenge of further adjustments. This notion is consistent with the literature on socialization processes over the life course (see Bush & Simmons 1981), which indicates that periods of stability and continuity are typically followed by turning points and discontinuity.

The life-course perspective in sociology (Elder 1985, 1991, Hagestad 1990) derives from a separate tradition and has not been applied to the study of self-concept, but the value of this approach is its view of the organism and the situation within an interacting dynamic over the life span. Because the life course and its developmental paths are linked to social change, successive birth cohorts experience the same historical events (war, migration, prosperity) at different ages, resulting in different life trajectories. As one illustration, American children born between 1950-1955 grew up in a prosperous period, encountered an adolescence scarred by the Vietnam War, and entered young adulthood during the "me-decade" of the 1970s. But the birth cohort of 1956-1960 experienced the turbulent Vietnam years as young children, missed the draft, and went to high school and college during the recessionary but self-centered 1970s. These two cohorts experienced the same slice of history but from developmentally different vantage points that may have resulted in significantly different experiences, values, attitudes, and self-concepts. By comparing across cohorts it is possible to trace linkages between age and historical location, between life history and social surroundings.

Elder (1991) argues that an adequate conceptualization of the life course involves recognition of three distinct meanings of age: (i) developmental age, one's stage in the aging process from birth to death; (ii) social age, the social meanings of age expressed in the timetables, expectations, and turning points of the life course; and (iii) historical age, or time in the course of social change. By calling attention to comparisons within and across age-linked cohorts, a life-course perspective provides important directions for the study of self-concept over time: Within cohorts, how does the timing and arrangement of life events affect self-attitudes? For example, it would be reasonable to expect the self-feelings of a teenage mother to be considerably less stable than those of a parent just a few years older. How do the effects on self-concept of various life transitions (widowhood, divorce, remarriage, work transitions) vary as a function of their timing in the life course and their intersection with other role trajectories? For example, how does the salience and ordering of role identities change when a trajectory of job advancement coincides with marital dissolution and diminished parental involvement? How are life-course patterns and variations in self-concept experienced by members of different races, genders, religions, and other social groups? Gecas & Mortimer (1987) argue that the early adult transition (principally the transition from school to work) may be more detrimental to the self-concept of lower class individuals, compared to individuals in the middle and upper class, because of social class differences in occupational conditions, such as job complexity and opportunities for self-direction. Across cohorts, how do age-stratified historical experiences influence self-concept processes? For example, were there generational differences in the effects of the "me-decade," in viewing the self as "institutional" versus "impulsive" (Turner 1976), or in perceiving self in terms of what one does versus what one is (McGuire & McGuire 1986)?

In sum, life-span and life-course frameworks provide two complementary perspectives for viewing self-concept in relation to interacting processes (biological, developmental, and social) over the life course.

#### CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF SELF-CONCEPT

It has been argued that researchers need to pursue new avenues of investigation to understand the changing properties of self-concept over time. In many cases the theoretical groundwork has been laid, but researchers have not yet capitalized on these insights. Most studies of self-concept continue to rely on one measure of one dimension, usually global self-esteem, measured at one point in time, producing "an unduly constricted view of self-process and the way behavior is shaped in situations" (Turner & Schutte 1981:3).

We must measure self-concept as both a structure and a process, i.e. a dynamic structure that responds to situational stimuli, incorporates new elements, rearranges, adjusts, and stabilizes temporarily before encountering new stimuli and undergoing further revisions. Some of the preliminary research examining cross-

situational stability in self-feelings supports the view that self-feelings may be represented by a moving baseline. This theory balances the structural and processual views by recognizing the persistent core of self-identity but it also directs attention to the features of social interaction that generate changing levels and configurations of self-image.

One high priority in this area of research is to move beyond classroom administration of our favorite questionnaires and to accept the challenge of measuring self-feelings in the wide range of contexts in which they are felt, e.g. family, school, peer group, and work settings. The position taken here is that many elements of self-concept are lost in sterile classroom and experimental conditions. Triangulation may be achieved through qualitative approaches, open-ended free descriptions of self (McGuire & McGuire 1986, McGuire et al 1986, Turner & Schutte 1981), in-depth interviewing, case histories, and extended observation periods, providing rich data to complement the sophisticated quantitative data that are commonly examined.

A second promising area for investigation is continuity and change over the life course. The research to date is extremely lopsided, with 12 and 13 year olds forming the floor and 18 to 22 year olds representing the ceiling of our convenience samples. A number of studies portray early adolescence as a period of self-concept disturbance, but without considerable research on self-concept stability at other stages in life there is no reference point against which to judge early adolescence, thereby making it difficult to justify declarations that this is a "crisis" period.

Self-concept is a structure but it is also a process. It is stable but it also changes. It may be described by a moving baseline, or a process of structural change. These conclusions should be subjected to systematic analysis, however, requiring researchers to examine this interesting and complex phenomenon as it actually exists: over time.

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