

Situational and Transituational Determinants of Adolescent Self-Feelings*

By: Ritch C. Savin-Williams and David H. Demo

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Abstract:

Employing a new self-report technique (paging devices), the self-feelings of 35 adolescents were assessed in various naturalistic contexts. Regression analysis was used to assess the stability of self-feelings. Individuals fell into three groups: stable, oscillating, and unpredictable (the largest). For the sample as a whole, self-feelings were not influenced by the immediate context, although specific settings, activities, and others present within the contexts elicited various levels of self-feelings. More crucial for predicting the self-feelings of adolescents are such enduring characteristics as sex, social class, pubertal maturation, stability group, birth order, and number of siblings. The authors argue for a baseline conceptualization of adolescent self-conception from which fluctuations occur.

Article:

Are self-feelings relatively stable, enduring qualities of the individual that are not situationally specific? Or, do one's self-feelings depend to a large extent on where one is, who one is with, or what one is doing? Although a growing number of researchers have found little empirical support for viewing personality as consisting of sustained traits (e.g., Bern, 1972; Bern & Allen, 1974; Endler & Hunt, 1968; Mischel, 1968, 1973; Shweder, 1975, 1979a, 1979b), investigators of the self-concept refer to its components, for example, self-esteem, in "global" personality terms (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; M. Rosenberg, 1965, 1979). One question explored in the current study is the extent to which self-feelings are stable or transituational.

Certainly, there is a long tradition to the idea that situational characteristics produce variations in self-feelings. James (1890) described self-esteem as a barometer that rises and falls as a function of one's aspirations and achievements. Cooley (1902) specified that social processes, that is, reflected appraisals, attach significance to our failures and successes, thereby generating variations in self-regard. Similarly, Mead (1934) advanced the notion that we see ourselves as we believe others see us, a self-perception that changes according to the others with whom we are interacting. However, whereas these ideas provided the necessary theoretical foundation, the task of isolating and identifying the important contextual determinants has been largely neglected.

Recently, Burke (1980) investigated the effects of situational characteristics on the self-image. Burke describes this image as a situation-specific "working copy" of identity that undergoes revisions and modifications as the

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individual moves across social settings. This processual perspective enables the researcher to explore individual change by comparing self-images from different points in time. In addition, these "snapshots" of self-imagery permit a determination of the stable and enduring qualities of self-conception, clearly an important area of investigation. M. Rosenberg (1979) suggests that some individuals may possess stable self-attitudes whereas others demonstrate less constancy, but he emphasizes the former component: "The general need to maintain stable attitudes is amplified enormously with respect to self-attitudes, for without some picture of what he is like, the individual is virtually immobilized" (p. 59). The problem is that the cross-sectional nature of Rosenberg's data has prevented him from testing the possibility of stable, transituational self-feelings. He later concedes, "unfortunately, we are aware of no research dealing with the social conditions likely to generate instability (of the self-concept)" (p. 119).

A more plausible interpretation is that self- feelings are characterized by a "baseline." from which situational fluctuations emerge, creating contextual self-feelings. Viewed in this manner, an individual derives a baseline self-image by considering his or her self-feelings in a number of different social situations. This more processual view also accounts for self-feelings that may result from the reverse process: Frozen self-images at various moments in time are partially a function of one's baseline self-identity. An athlete, for example, may not condemn him- or herself for playing tennis poorly because he or she knows that many other athletic skills outweigh this one inability.

Although these issues have been the focus of much theoretical discussion, few empirical studies have adequately measured situational changes in self-conception. The present study, then utilizes a signaling device to obtain repeated measures of self-feelings in various naturalistic settings. If external contextual differences have little effect on self-feelings within a person, then an argument for stable, transituational self-conception is supported. If, on the other hand, situational variations result in fluctuating self-feelings, then a more context-dependent view of self-conception is suggested.

Assuming the latter position, that of context-dependent self-feelings, a second question must be addressed: What types of situational characteristics produce fluctuations in self-conception? Whereas considerable attention has been devoted to self-esteem and its sociodemographic determinants,¹ few empirical investigations have explored other dimensions of the self-concept, nor have they examined the role of more contemporaneous components of the immediate social context in determining those self-perceptions. Furthermore, the above research as well as that of M. Rosenberg (1979) on contextual dissonance has examined the determinants of self-esteem within a static rather than temporal framework. An example is Gecas's (1972) study, which explores the effects of different contextual frames of reference on adolescent self-esteem. Rather than measuring the dependent variable in each of the situations over a period of time, Gecas relies on a single measurement in a classroom setting. Still, he found important contextual differences in self-esteem, with subjects reporting highest feelings of self-worth when in the presence of peers and lowest self-esteem when in school classrooms. A more recent study (Griffin, Chassin, & Young, 1981) employed a similar method, asking respondents, at one point in time, to describe themselves in four different roles: student, athlete, friend, and son/daughter. Again, the results were sufficiently clear to conclude that multiple self-conceptions exist and that they are determined to a large degree by changing interactional contexts. To extract more carefully the important situational variables, however, it is necessary to move beyond the static concept of role and employ a more dynamic perspective on human behavior. As M. Rosenberg and Turner (1981) assert in an important monograph assessing current social psychology, "the investigator who observes behavior intimately, at length, and repeatedly in its natural setting should come closer to grasping the valid meanings of the acts in question" (p. xix).

¹ Included in this literature is research on the effects of sex (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; McDonald & Gynther, 1965; F. Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975), race (Proshansky & Newton, 1968; M. Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simmons, Brown, Bush, & Blyth, 1978; Wiley, 1979), social class (Demo, 1979; Demo & Savin-Williams, in press; M. Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978), and school setting (Powell & Fuller, 1973; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979; St. John, 1971).

Three significant, immediate contextual variables are examined in this study: the setting in which the individual is embedded, the activity in which he or she is engaged, and the number and relationship of participants present. The proposition tested is whether behavioral settings (e.g., school, home, public place), activities (e.g., schoolwork, personal maintenance, social interaction), and participants (e.g., peers, siblings, strangers) each create a unique dimension of the situation sufficient enough to affect an individual's self-feelings. Some individuals may be more comfortable when alone, others when socializing with friends, and still others when in the company of their family at home. This analysis, then, will enable us to determine the effects of various contextual variables on the nature and stability of self-feelings.

Finally, we need to explore a third, and more frequently researched, question: What types of enduring, transituational characteristics produce variations in self-feelings? Numerous studies have employed traditional self-esteem measures to examine their relations with various sociodemographic variables (see Footnote 1); few studies, however, have investigated the impact of these variables on broader self-feelings. Because the social and personal characteristics being assessed in this article are relatively enduring qualities, it is more reasonable and appropriate to utilize repeated measures of self-description. Hence, we correlate out repeated measures with important transituational conditions for adolescents, including environmental factors such as social class, birth order and number of siblings (Bachman, 1970; M. Rosenberg, 1965; Schooler, 1972), and personal characteristics such as sex and pubertal maturation level (Jaquish & Savin-Williams, 1981; Simmons et al., 1979). It is thus possible to assess the relative contribution of contemporaneous and transituational forces in shaping adolescent self-conception.

Method

Participants

The 35 adolescents (15 boys and 20 girls) included in the study are participants in a six-year longitudinal study of adolescent self-esteem and its correlates.² Chosen at random the year before from an alphabetized list of all seventh-grade students at a local junior high school, all were either 13 or 14 years of age ($M = 13.3$ years) during the 1978-1979 school year. Except for three minority group members, the adolescents are Caucasian and represent all socioeconomic classes and major religious identifications.

Measures

Self-feelings were measured by a new self-report technique that allowed for multiple measures of self-reported self-feelings to be obtained in naturalistic settings. Each participant carried a paging device (beeper) that signaled the adolescent on a random (except during school hours) schedule six to eight times daily during the waking hours. At each beep, the participant responded by completing a Beep Sheet (see the Appendix). The adolescents averaged a 78% response rate to the beeps. A mean number of 39 Beep Sheets for each individual was obtained during a 1-week period from the study participants.

Self-feelings were operationally defined by the participants' responses to the list of 40 words on the back side of the Beep Sheet. These words were taken from various self-esteem and identity scales; 20 are measures of positive self-feelings (e.g., loved, secure, needed) and 20 are measures of negative self-feelings (e.g., ashamed, weak, useless). Participants were asked to circle as many of the words as applied to their feelings about themselves at the moment beeped. A self-feeling score was calculated for each Beep Sheet by subtracting the number of negative words circled from the number of positive words circled and dividing that quantity by the total number of words circled (possible range = -1.0 to $+1.1$). For example, if an adolescent circled six positive words and three negative words, the self-feeling score would be computed as follows: $SF = (6 - 3)/9 = .33$.

² "The Ecology of Self-Esteem During Adolescence" is funded by the Spencer Foundation, R. Savin-Williams principal investigator, Begun in January 1978, when the adolescents were 12 years of age, the study follows the same individuals through junior and senior high school. Eight measures of self-esteem are included in the study.

In this report, we focus on Beep Sheet responses regarding setting, activity, and companions present at the moment beeped. The adolescents' responses to these variables were coded as belonging to nominal categories, established after a pilot study with the paging devices. With respect to setting ("Where were you?") the response on each Beep Sheet was coded with one of the following categories: public place, subject's home, other's home, school, and outside. In like manner, each response to the question, "What things were you doing?" was coded as either school work, personal maintenance, social interaction, noninteractive leisure, active leisure, or other. Concerning companions present at the moment beeped, responses were coded with the following possible categories, alone, parents, siblings, family and friends, peers, strangers, and teacher and class. A more detailed account of the specific responses that were included in these categories appears in Table 1.

Procedure

For the duration of 1 week during the eighth grade, each participant carried a paging device from the time he or she arose in the morning until bedtime. The paging devices did not beep during class hours on school days. Because the junior high school would not allow the beepers to be carried in school, during school hours the adolescents were instructed to complete the Beep Sheet at four a priori designated times, placed at intervals throughout the school day (e.g., 9:05 a.m., 11:05 a.m., 1:05 p.m., 3:05 p.m.). The beep schedule on school days, therefore, consisted of four designated self-report times during school hours plus four random beeps occurring before and after school and in the evening. On weekends and holidays, participants responded to the paging device at eight random times throughout the day from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Reliability

To assess the degree to which the self-descriptions were related to each other, and thus to test our assumption concerning which words measured positive and negative self-feelings, we used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) factor analysis program with the words circled on the 1,364 beep responses. Employing the vARimax ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX, seven factors accounted for 78% of the variance in the words. These factors were internally consistent (with one exception) in regard to containing all positive or all negative self-descriptions. Within each factor, each word was significantly ($p < .01$) correlated with all other intrafactor words (Table 2).

Results

Self-Feeling Scores

For the sample as a whole, the mean self-feeling level was .14, with individual scores ranging from —.29 to +.61. Boys had signif-

Table 1
Coding Scheme for Beep Responses

Category	Example
Setting	
Public place	Club, organization, store, mall, shopping area, restaurant, parent's workplace, theater, church
Subject's home	Home of the adolescent
Other home	Another person's home (peers/adults)
School	School
Outside	Outside, recreation area, vehicle
Activity	
School work	Homework or classwork
Personal maintenance	Eating or drinking, grooming, clothing
Social interaction	Cooperative construction with another, talking or engaged in conversation, shopping, sexual activities, dating
Noninteractive leisure	Watching TV, sleeping or relaxing, listening to music, thinking about something, reading (nonhomework), dreams or daydreaming, sitting and standing, watching activities or movies, observing
Active leisure	Walking, individual sports or activities, playing sports or games with another hobby
Other	Losing, bored, worried, having fun, fights, negative reactions, successful wins
Participants	
Alone	Alone
Parents	Mother only, father only, both parents
Siblings	Same-sex older sib(s), same-sex younger sib(s), opposite-sex older sib(s), opposite-sex younger sib(s), or any combination of the above
Family/friends	Combination of immediate family members, extended family members, family and friends, adult friends, adults friends and peers, college student
Peers	Same-sex peer, opposite-sex peer, multiple peers of same sex, multiple peers of opposite sex, peers of both sexes, younger peers
Strangers	Strangers of same age, older, or younger; strangers: mixed by age and sex, strangers, and peers
Teacher and class	Teacher and class

icantly more favorable self-feeling scores than did girls (.29 and .03, respectively; $t = 3.75$, $p < .001$).

The mean number of words circled at each beep instance was 4.02. Seven of the 10 most frequently selected words are positive expressions of self-feelings. The participants were most likely to indicate that they felt relaxed ($n = 585$), bored ($n = 471$), or happy ($n = 411$). Words seldom circled by either sex included unloved ($n = 18$), inhibited ($n = 21$), and ashamed ($n = 24$). Boys more frequently selected the terms skilled, in control, powerful, and clear to describe themselves; girls were more apt to circle frustrated, tense, unsure, and sluggish.

Factor	% of variance	Word	r^a
1	33 ^b	Loved	.77
		Safe	.65
		Needed	.60
		Secure	.52
		Free	.31
2	13	Powerful	.55
		Proud	.55
		On time	.43
		Clear	.39
		Control	.34
3	11	Relaxed	.66
		Free	.52
		Bored ^c	.47
		Safe	.28
4	6	Skilled	.74
		Productive	.38
		Growing	.32
5	6	Tense	.56
		Inhibited	.41
		Unsure	.41
		Unprepared	.26
6	5	Frustrated	.62
		Depressed	.52
7 ^d	5	Belonging	.61
		Confident	.40

^a Correlation of word with the factor; all correlations, $p < .01$.

^b Percentage of the total self-feeling-score variance.

^c Exception, that is, a negative self-description significantly correlated with a positive self-description.

^d No other factor contained more than one word or contributed more than 4% of the variance.

First Analysis: Predicting Self-Feelings

Using the TROLL package program, each individual's self-feeling score for one beep instance was regressed on his or her immediately prior beep instance. Generalized least squares (GLS) estimates were computed for each individual according to the autoregressive equation: $x_T = B X_T + e$. To assess the extent to which each beta coefficient was significantly different from zero, t tests were conducted. If significant, then the conclusion is that for an individual, each self-feeling score (beep instance) predicts the next, implying "stable" self-feelings.

Based on the significance levels of the beta coefficients, the adolescents can be divided into three groups. The largest, the unpredictable group, contains those 21 individuals whose beta coefficients were not significantly different from zero (range = $-.188$ to $+.136$). For these individuals, one self-feeling score was independent of the next self-feeling score. The second group consists of 10 individuals whose beta coefficients approached or equaled significance (range = $+.206$ to $+.727$). Individuals in this stable group had self-feeling scores that were highly predictive of preceding and succeeding self-feeling levels. Composing 11% of the sample was the oscillating group. These four individuals had negative beta coefficients that approached or equaled significance (range = $-.219$ to $-.323$). With these individuals there was a pattern to their instability: one self-feeling score predicted that the next would be in the opposite direction (i.e., high, low, high, low . . . self-feelings).

All individuals who had significant predictable beta coefficients had moderate self-feeling scores, either moderately high (range = $+.22$ to $+.38$) or moderately low (range = $-.03$ to $-.15$). Eight of the 10 individuals in the stable group are girls whereas three of the four oscillating group members are boys.

Second Analysis: Contextual Variation

Because we found that self-feelings vary from one moment/situation to another, the next step was to identify the characteristics of the immediate context—setting, activity, and participants—that produce these fluctuations. Each of these contextual variables represents a summation of five to seven categories (see Table 1), and these

variables were regressed on the overall self-feelings level for both sexes and then for each sex separately (Table 3).

When considered individually, neither the physical setting, the current activity, nor the relationship of those present significantly influenced the self-feelings level of the adolescent population. This was true for both boys and girls. There were also no significant sex by context interaction effects. However, the joint effects of setting, activity, and participants differed for boys and girls. That is, the three contextual variables are not independent, and when considered together, they significantly affect the self-feelings of girls ($p = .05$) but not those of boys.

Third Analysis: Transituational Determinants

Having determined that setting, activity, and participants, at least when considered

Table 3
Regression Results for Setting, Activity, Participants, and Sex, With Self-Feelings as the Dependent Variable

Variable	df	MS	F value	p
Setting	4	.37	.85	.49
Activity	5	.58	1.32	.25
Participants	6	.53	1.21	.30
Sex	1	21.02	48.27	.00
Explained	16	2.16	4.95	.00
Residual	1347	.44		
Main effects for boys				
Setting	4	.21	.50	.74
Activity	5	.48	1.12	.35
Participants	6	.60	1.41	.21
Explained	15	.51	1.19	.28
Residual	537	.43		
Main effects for girls				
Setting	4	.59	1.33	.26
Activity	5	.46	1.03	.40
Participants	6	.26	.60	.73
Explained	15	.73	1.66	.05
Residual	795	.44		

Table 4
Regression Results for Number of Siblings, Sibling Placement, Pubertal Maturation, Social Class, Stability of Self-Feelings, and Sex, With Level of Self-Feelings as the Dependent Variable

Variable	df	MS	F value	p
Number of siblings	1	2.60	12.35	.001
Sibling placement	2	2.48	8.81	.000
Pubertal maturation	5	.90	2.57	.025
Social class	7	.92	2.49	.015
Self-feelings stability	2	2.91	10.35	.000
Sex	1	1.26	5.96	.015
Explained	18	3.00	7.15	.000
Residual	1345	.42		

individually, do not significantly affect the level of self-feeling, we then sought to determine the impact of more enduring characteristics on self-perceptions. Because one such individual attribute has already been identified—stable, unpredictable, or oscillatory self-feelings—the next question would be whether these groups vary by level of self-feelings. Other important transituational characteristics of the individuals to be included in the regression are (a) sex, male or female; (b) social class, Hollingshead and Redich's (1958) eight categories for

parents' occupation; (c) birth order, youngest, oldest/ only, or middle child; (d) number of siblings, few (0-2) or many (3-9); (e) pubertal maturation, Tanner's (1962) five stages of pubic hair and genitalia/breast development.

Data presented in Table 4 indicate that each of the six variables are significant ($p < .05$) predictors of self-feelings when the other variables in the equation are controlled. Employing a .05 alpha level, only number of siblings is not significant without controls for the other variables. Boys had significantly higher self-feelings than girls, and individuals in the middle class (Categories 3-6) reported more favorable self-perceptions than those in lower and upper classes. The oldest or only children had more positive self-feelings than youngest or middle children, and those with unpredictable self-feelings had more favorable feelings toward themselves than those in the stable or oscillating groups. Finally, individuals who were late in pubertal maturation had significantly higher self-feelings than did those adolescents who matured "on time."

Discussion

We initially posed three questions: (a) Are self-feelings relatively stable, enduring qualities? (b) If not, what are the immediate contextual determinants of self-feelings?; and (c) Are transituational factors significant contributors to self-feelings level? Although generally ignored by investigators of the self-concept, these three questions appear to be the quintessential issues for self-concept research as well as a central issue in the study of any personality variable.

The results from the current analysis indicate that whereas some individuals were significantly stable and others significantly unstable in their self-feelings, the majority (60%) of the adolescents reported self-descriptions that fell in the mid range. That is, for individuals in this group, self-feelings were neither predictably stable nor predictably unstable from one moment to the next. We refer to these self-descriptions as unpredictable (nonsignificant beta coefficients). These findings call into question the view that self-conception is a sustained, transituational phenomenon for most individuals. For 29% of our sample, however, self-feelings level did not fluctuate from one moment to the next; for this group, self-conception was an enduring quality. By contrast, a relatively small percentage of our adolescent sample reported oscillating self-feelings; for these individuals, one point in time significantly predicted that in the next instance their self-regard would be in the opposite direction. These individuals may be the prototypical "storm and stress" adolescents of such theorists as G. S. Hall (1904) and A. Freud (1958). We found, however, that they represent about the same percentage of the total adolescent population reported by other recent empirical studies (Adelson, 1979; Hill, 1980; Offer & Offer, 1975).

The data thus indicate that many self-feelings are neither predictably stable nor oscillatory, but just unpredictable. For 89% of our sample, there is a small range of fluctuation, and we believe this suggests viewing self-feelings as having a baseline level from which contextual variations emerge. Our next task was to test whether three immediate contexts were influential in determining the extent of this fluctuation from a baseline of self-conception.

An analysis of the population as a whole revealed that current setting, activity, and participant(s) present did not significantly affect self-feelings. A separate analysis of the sexes confirmed these findings, though the joint effects of the three contexts were important for girls. It thus appears that if the immediate environment does account for baseline fluctuations in self-feelings, we have yet to tap the most salient contexts or contextual cues, especially for boys.

The sex difference in self-descriptions is consistent with Franks and Marolla's (1976) assertion that girls score higher on "outer" self-esteem, or feelings of self-worth, than they do on "inner" self-esteem, or feelings of efficacy and competence. That is, boys describing themselves as powerful and in control, and girls' self-perceptions as tense and unsure, indicate a sex difference in the way adolescents view themselves as capable and efficacious beings. Further, Gecas (1972) presented evidence that contextual variations in self-esteem are attributable more to the inner dimension, or self-power, than to the outer dimension, or self-worth. He reasons that

a person's feelings of self-worth, once established may be more easily transported across social settings and less dependent on continued reinforcement. Power, on the other hand, may have to be more frequently re-established as one moves across social settings. (p. 341)

Thus, girls may report greater self-worth than self-power and therefore experience milder fluctuations in self-feelings than boys. Certainly, further research is necessary to disentangle the complex relations among self-concept components and their situational determinants.

In addition to stability of self-feelings and sex of the respondent, other important transsituational influences on self-feelings level include social class, number of siblings, birth order, and pubertal maturation. Although these variables are interesting as independent predictors of self-feelings, the important finding for the present discussion is that these enduring conditions are more critical determinants of overall self-feelings than are temporary conditions, such as physical setting. Thus, variables such as social class and pubertal maturation determine the general level of baseline self-feelings, whereas specific features of the immediate context may generate the fluctuations from that baseline.

The view presented here is that self-feelings may be predictably stable, oscillatory, or just unpredictable, as was the case for the majority of our adolescent population. We were unable, however, to demonstrate that when self-feelings are assessed in various situations that context per se is a sufficient explanatory variable to predict fluctuations from a baseline level. Our failure in this regard may have been contingent upon our inability to delineate more carefully the characteristics of the context most salient for the individual (Bronfenbrenner, Note 1). Those contexts that have appeal, desirability, and a corresponding sense of personal control for the individual may be influential in affecting adolescent self-feelings (Brim, Note 2). Our findings lend support to the views of Epstein (1979), which stress the consistency of human behavior and personality across a number of immediate situations. Apparently, the self-feelings of adolescents are more influenced by their enduring personal characteristics and social conditions than by features of the immediate context.

These interpretations require further re- search on populations of both sexes and at various developmental stages, because self-concept stability and determinants (e.g., social class) may vary during the life course (Demo & Savin-Williams, in press; M. Rosenberg, 1979) as well as within such critical periods as adolescence (M. Rosenberg, 1979). Research is currently in progress that extends the present analysis to investigations that further clarify the role that sex plays in understanding contextual variations in self-feelings and that examine the developmental change and stability of adolescent self-esteem (Savin-Williams & Demo, in press).

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Appendix

Beep Sheet

Date:

AS YOU WERE BEEPED. . . .

Where were you?

What things were you doing?

What were you thinking about?

Wish you were doing something else? What?

Who were you with? Give the number, age, sex, and relationship (parents, sister, friend, acquaintance, stranger, etc.) of those present.

Time is passing (circle appropriate dot):

Fast O o . . o O Slow

How would you describe yourself at the moment beeped? Circle as many words below as are appropriate.

inhibited	happy	skilled	left behind
clear	relaxed	productive	exposed
consistent	free	unloved	fussy
tense	sluggish	useless	loved
confident	lonely	growing	bored
unprepared	powerful	overwhelmed	unsure
belonging	empty	affectionate	on time
weak	ashamed	depressed	in control
safe	proud	needed	conforming
spontaneous	secure	frustrated	manipulated

Other feelings about yourself:
