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High, low, and in between: Self-esteem development from middle childhood to young adulthood

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ABSTRACT

We describe self-esteem development in a German sample ($N = 240$, 48% female) followed longitudinally from middle childhood to young adulthood, using data spanning 20 years. Data from the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) and the Self-Description Questionnaire III (Marsh & O'Neill, 1985) were linked using item response theory methods. Rank-order stability was high in middle childhood, low in adolescence, and highest in young adulthood. Mean-levels were relatively high in middle childhood, decreased into adolescence, but increased into young adulthood. Early childhood shyness and aggressiveness as rated by parents, teachers, and observers did not influence the self-esteem trajectory. We provide the first longitudinal evidence for the self-esteem trajectory from middle childhood to young adulthood, replicating and extending previous findings.

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1. Introduction

Global self-esteem refers to a person's subjective evaluation of his or her self-worth. The extent to which a person holds positive self-views has been shown to be important for fostering goals, coping strategies, and behaviors that enable success for one's relationships, career, and well-being (Kuster, Orth, & Meier, 2013; Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Steiger, Allemand, Robins, & Fend, 2014; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Recently, there has been an influx of longitudinal research characterizing the trajectory of self-esteem (Orth, Maes, & Schmitt, 2015; Orth & Robins, 2014; von Soest, Wichstrøm, & Kvaalem, 2016), offering much needed insights into the normative development of self-esteem from adolescence to young adulthood, and young adulthood to old age. Yet, to date, research on the lifespan trajectory of self-esteem has not included the shift from childhood to adolescence. During this time, children mature in their cognitive abilities, struggle with puberty, and become more concerned with their peers (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005), making the transition from childhood to adolescence especially important for self-esteem development. Furthermore, there is little empirical research that has examined the developmental antecedents of self-esteem (but see Harris et al., 2015; Orth,

2017). Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the lifespan development of self-esteem from middle childhood onward, and moreover, attempt to identify childhood factors that predict the trajectory of self-esteem itself.

In the present study, we examined global self-esteem development from middle childhood to young adulthood. We began by charting the trajectory of self-esteem, and sought to extend previous cross-sectional and longitudinal findings regarding self-esteem development by examining both stability and change during middle childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. We used multiple informant reports (i.e., parent, teacher, and observer ratings) of early childhood personality to predict who increased or decreased in self-esteem during the transitions from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to young adulthood. Specifically, we focused on shyness and aggressiveness between the ages of 4 and 6 years old as predictors of self-esteem because these traits have been linked to low self-esteem and difficulties in the social domain, raising the possibility that they could affect the development of self-esteem. Below, we review previous research on these topics, first turning to the literature on self-esteem development.

1.1. The development of self-esteem from middle childhood to young adulthood

Self-esteem is an evaluation of one's own worthiness and competence, but theoretical perspectives emphasize the importance of

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the social world in shaping self-esteem. Our self-views are thought to develop from our interactions with others and how we believe others see us (Cooley, 1902; Harter, 2012; Mead, 1934). Sociometer theory (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) highlights the social nature of self-esteem and posits that it is a sociometer, or psychological gauge that signals the extent to which one is accepted by others, helping people maintain their social ties. The stable component of self-esteem is seen as one's judgment that he or she is generally valued and accepted by others, and as the "resting state" of the sociometer (Leary et al., 1995). Self-esteem is moderately stable across time and contexts, yet it is also mutable, especially during developmental transitions such as the ones from childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to young adulthood (Huang, 2010; Hutteman, Nestler, Wagner, Egloff, & Back, 2015). Both rank-order stability and mean-levels of self-esteem change across the lifespan. Rank-order stability refers to an individual's standing on the construct of interest, relative to others in the sample. Rank-order stability of self-esteem is lowest in early childhood and old age, relatively low but increasing in adolescence, and highest in adulthood (Donnellan, Kenny, Trzesniewski, Lucas, & Conger, 2012; Orth & Robins, 2014; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). In childhood, stability is considered to be low because self-esteem is emerging and not fully formed during this time (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). In adolescence, stability is argued to be higher than in childhood due to an increased awareness of self, but lower relative to young adulthood because of maturational and social changes that are experienced during this time (Orth & Robins, 2014; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Accordingly, in the present study, we expected to find low rank-order stability in childhood, low but increasing stability into adolescence, and high stability into young adulthood.

Mean, or average levels of self-esteem, are relatively high in childhood, decrease during adolescence, and then steadily increase into young adulthood (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010; Orth et al., 2012, 2015; Robins et al., 2002; von Soest et al., 2016). Young children are thought to exhibit relatively high self-esteem because their self-views are unrealistically positive (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). As children's cognitive skills mature, they begin to compare their skills and abilities to their peers and consider feedback from close others, including the extent to which they are liked and accepted by others, and develop more accurate, and generally, less positive self-views (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Self-esteem continues to decrease into adolescence, with pubertal changes, changing school contexts, and the increased capacity for self-reflection being implicated in this decline (Orth & Robins, 2014; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). During the transition into young adulthood, self-esteem has been found to increase as individuals increase in autonomy at school and work, and deepen their social relationships with others (Orth & Robins, 2014). Accordingly, in the present study, we expected to find self-esteem to be relatively high in mid-childhood, decrease into adolescence, and then increase into young adulthood.

Self-esteem development has been examined almost exclusively in childhood (Arunkumar, Midgley, & Urda, 1999; Rodriguez, Wigfield, & Eccles, 2003), from childhood to adolescence (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991), or from adolescence to adulthood (Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth & Robins, 2014; von Soest et al., 2016), including in a recent study that examined self-esteem in the LOGIC data from when youth were 17- to 29-years-old (Luan et al., 2017). These studies have contributed much towards our understanding of self-esteem development. Yet, when piecing together the evidence from different developmental and time periods, we cannot rule out cohort effects – the possibility that age differences in self-esteem are confounded with experiences

of events that are not shared with other populations (Baltes, Cornelius, & Nesselroade, 1979). For example, some have claimed that societal shifts in the focus on the self have influenced the nature and developmental course of self-esteem (Twenge, 2006). Studies linking childhood to adulthood are rare, understandably, because researchers are often faced with the issue of heterotypical continuity, where manifestations of the same underlying trait change as individuals mature. In the present study, we had the unique opportunity to track self-esteem in the same group of individuals over two decades, allowing us to examine stability and change in self-esteem from middle childhood to young adulthood.

1.2. Early childhood shyness and aggressiveness as antecedents of self-esteem development

Personality is thought to influence the ways individuals construe the world around them (Caspi & Shiner, 2011; Rothbart, 2011) as well as themselves (Robins, Donnellan, Widaman, & Conger, 2010; Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001). Specifically, personality can influence which features of a social interaction that one attends to, in turn, coloring one's perceptions and experience, including one's self-evaluations (Caspi & Shiner, 2011). Shyness and aggressiveness are aspects of personality that reveal how individuals relate to the social world, and reflect both temperament and social competence (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987, 1988; Denissen, Asendorpf, & Van Aken, 2008; Horney, 1950; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Shyness refers to a tendency towards experiencing worry, tension, or awkwardness during social interactions, especially with strangers (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Coplan & Rubin, 2010). Aggressiveness, in contrast, refers to a proneness towards behaving with the intention of causing harm to another person (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Caspi et al. (1987, 1988) operationalized "moving away from the world" and "moving against the world" as informant ratings of children's tendencies towards exhibiting shy and aggressive behaviors respectively, and found that being perceived as either shy or aggressive in childhood predicted poor outcomes in the psychological, social, and work domains 30 years later. Shyness and aggressiveness in childhood are thought to have such powerful consequences on individuals' life trajectories because of their consistency throughout the lifespan (Caspi et al., 1987, 1988).

The extant research indicates that shyness in childhood is concurrently associated with low self-esteem (Crozier, 1995; Kemple, David, & Wang, 1996; Rubin et al., 2009). Studies also indicate that shyness in childhood shows negative prospective effects for self-esteem. In a previous study that examined the LOGIC data, youth who were seen as extremely shy towards familiar peers at 4- to 6-years-old were likely to report low levels of self-esteem between the ages of 8- and 10-years-old (Asendorpf & van Aken, 1994). In another, longitudinal study, Icelandic youth who were categorized as shy at 7-years-old were likely to exhibit low levels of self-esteem in early and middle adolescence (Hart, Hoffmann, Edelstein, & Keller, 1997). Shyness in childhood is also predictive of a restricted social life (Gest, 1997) and low self-esteem (Rubin, Chen, McDougall, Bowker, & McKinnon, 1995) in adulthood. Additionally, Swedish girls who were perceived as shy in early childhood were likely to exhibit low levels of self-esteem 30 years later (Kerr, 2000). These results suggest that we might expect that individuals perceived as shy in early childhood might be negatively affected in their self-esteem development.

With regard to aggressiveness, the extant research suggests that it is associated with low self-worth (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi,

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