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Self-esteem growth trajectory from adolescence to mid-adulthood and its predictors in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the trajectory of self-esteem from adolescence to mid-adulthood and its predictors in adolescence in a prospective cohort sample with a 26-year follow-up. Participants of a Finnish cohort study in 1983 at 16 years ($N=2194$) were followed up at ages 22 ($N=1656$), 32 ($N=1471$) and 42 ($N=1334$) years. Self-esteem development was analyzed using latent growth curve models with parental socioeconomic status (SES), parental divorce, school achievement, daily smoking, and heavy drinking as time invariant covariates. Self-esteem grew linearly from 16 to 32 years, but stabilized after that with no growth between 32 and 42 years. Males had significantly higher self-esteem throughout the follow-up, although females had a faster growth rate. Better school performance and higher parental SES were associated with a higher initial level of self-esteem among both genders, while parental divorce among females and daily smoking among males were associated with a lower initial level of self-esteem. Among females the growth rate of self-esteem was practically unaffected by the studied covariates. Among males, however, the initial differences in self-esteem favouring those from a higher SES background were indicated to diminish, while the differences between non-smokers and smokers were indicated to increase. The studied adolescent covariates combined had only limited predictive value for the later self-esteem development. However, the effects of any covariate on the level and slope of the self-esteem trajectory, even if small, should be assessed in combination in order to identify whether they lead to converging, diverging or constantly equidistant self-esteem trajectories. The findings highlight the variety of roles that adolescent behaviours and social environments may have in the developmental process of self-esteem from adolescence into mid-adulthood.

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Global self-esteem refers to a person's overall evaluation of his or her worth and can be regarded as an essential component of mental health (e.g. Mann, Hosman,

Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004). Research has also shown that self-esteem is not a mere epiphenomenon of, but also predicts, a variety of important life outcomes including health, life satisfaction, educational attainment, and economic prospects (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Orth, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Research on self-esteem has traditionally

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focused on adolescent samples, but during the last decade studies have begun to shed light on the life-span development of self-esteem and its correlates (Huang, 2010; Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010; Orth et al., 2012; Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). However, prospective studies on the developmental trajectory of self-esteem extending from adolescence to mid-adulthood are still quite scarce and the picture of the predictors of the trajectory is far from conclusive. This study explores the self-esteem trajectory from adolescence (age 16) to mid-adulthood (age 42) and some relevant factors in adolescence as its predictors in a prospective cohort sample over a period of 26 years.

1. Self-esteem development from adolescence to adulthood

While adolescence unarguably is a critical period in the formation of self-esteem (e.g. Harter, 1999; Rosenberg, 1965), this does not mean, that it would be just a fixed quality thereafter, that, once set in adolescence, self-esteem would not be amenable to changes later in life. Rather, like in the recent theorizing in personality development (Mroczek & Little, 2014), also self-esteem is best conceptualized as a product of a lifelong developmental process (Mruk, 2006, p. 94). The age period from adolescence to mid-adulthood covers many role transitions, developmental stages and developmental tasks (Erikson, 1977; Havighurst, 1953) and successful (or unsuccessful) resolution of these challenges is likely to have an effect on the self-esteem development. This is because self-esteem is in part a product of the perceived competencies in those key roles that are the building blocks of a living considered as worthy and meaningful in a given cultural context (Mruk, 2006, p. 28). While the role transitions and developmental phases are to a great extent age-related and given the fact that for the majority the developmental challenges imposed by these transitions are in due course successfully managed, the average self-esteem trajectory should follow an increasing path as the uncertainties of adolescence are put behind and the new adulthood roles are assumed and gradually mastered with competence. However, while the average self-esteem trajectory might reflect the age normative succession of adulthood roles and the competencies they are a realization of, at individual level there is likely to be much variation in the trajectories reflecting the diversity and complexities of a human life course. Thus it is important to study the individual self-esteem trajectories in addition to the mean level changes.

Studies based on cross-sectional samples give mixed results on the development of self-esteem from adolescence to mid-adulthood. While Robins et al. (2002) using a very large multinational Internet-based sample on the life-span development of self-esteem reported a decrease in self-esteem during adolescence, an increase from late adolescence to young adulthood, and a relatively stable self-esteem between the 20s and 40s, a study by Meier, Orth, Denissen, and Kühnel (2011) showed self-esteem to increase linearly from age 13 to 72 years. Contradicting these findings McMullin and Cairney (2004), using a

representative population-based sample reported a declining trend of self-esteem from adolescence to old age. And yet Pullmann, Allik, and Realo (2009), using multiple representative samples and also an Internet-based sample concluded that there is no systematic age differences in global self-esteem and the mean self-esteem level in their study depended more on the type of the used measure (single vs. 10-item), sampling method and measurement error than age. These inconsistencies notwithstanding, a recent meta-analysis on mean-level changes in self-esteem indicated that self-esteem increases during late adolescence and young adulthood, but does not change after age 30, although due to a small number of data points the results beyond 30 years were only suggestive (Huang, 2010).

Few studies have examined self-esteem development at the level of individual change trajectories extending beyond the adolescent years. To our knowledge the only study covering the years between adolescence and mid-adulthood is the cohort-sequential study by Orth et al. (2012), where age cohorts from four generations were followed up for 12 years. That study showed self-esteem to develop curvilinearly between the ages of 16 and 97, so that growth was more rapid during late adolescence and young adulthood, getting slower during mid-adulthood, but still lasting up until around age 50 years, after which self-esteem began to decline. Studies covering the years from adolescence to young adulthood (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012; Erol & Orth, 2011; Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Greene & Way, 2005) have also indicated increasing self-esteem trajectories during this period, although the patterns of growth have differed to some extent, possibly in part due to the different age ranges of the samples. Two studies on adulthood samples beginning from age 25 indicate that self-esteem increases during young adulthood, continues to increase, although progressively more slowly, during mid-adulthood and turns to a decreasing trajectory only until around the 60s or thereafter (Orth et al., 2010; Shaw, Liang, & Krause, 2010). Thus studies based on individual trajectories seem to suggest that self-esteem develops positively from adolescence to adulthood, although there remains some inconsistency however regarding the shape of the trajectory as well as the point when the positive development stops and possibly turns into a decreasing trajectory.

In sum, based on both theoretical reasoning relating to the age-related developmental tasks and their (for the majority) successful management in due course, as well as the earlier empirical findings (perhaps with the exception of some cross-sectional studies on age differences), we expect self-esteem to increase from adolescence to mid-adulthood. As to the shape of the trajectory, the current findings are only suggestive, slightly favouring the view that the increase is more rapid first, but then levels off at some point.

1.1. Moderating role of gender

Gender is associated with self-esteem and a consistent finding is that males have higher self-esteem than females (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Major, Barr, Zubek,

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