Development of Self-Esteem Across the Lifespan

Ulrich Orth
University of Bern

Richard W. Robins
University of California, Davis

This manuscript has been accepted for publication but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination, and proofreading process. This manuscript may not exactly replicate the final published version. It is not the copy of record. Please cite it as follows:

In the *Up series* of documentaries, directors Paul Almond and Michael Apted have followed the lives of 14 British children since they were 7 years old, interviewing them every 7 years as they grew up and traversed the challenges and opportunities of adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age (Apted, 2012). The series was inspired by the Jesuit motto, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man.” The in-depth portrayals of the participants, although shaped by the unique lens through which they are viewed by the directors, provide an interesting set of biographies to explore patterns and mechanisms in the development of self and identity.

Self-esteem is a particularly salient issue in the life of Suzy, one of the participants in the Up series. At age 7, Suzy comes across as an effusive little girl who is excited about fashion and dolls. Just 7 years later, at age 14, she had become shy and withdrawn, retreating into an adolescent shell devoid of the interests and activities that excited her as a child. After enduring a somewhat tumultuous life, Suzy, at age 49, expresses regret that she failed to take responsibility for herself earlier in life and develop a stronger sense of her self-worth, concluding that “maybe now is the first time that I actually feel happy within my own skin. It’s taken me a long time to do it, but I actually feel that I can accept decisions, wrong decisions, that I have made in the past. I am comfortable with it now, I can live with it” (Apted, 2009). A central life transition for Suzy was the beginning of a committed and satisfying romantic relationship in her early 20s, which seemed to bolster her life satisfaction and self-esteem. Suzy’s life story provides a compelling portrayal of how self-esteem can wax and wane over the course of development, and how social relationships, in particular romantic relationships, can serve to enhance self-esteem, a topic to which we return later in this chapter.
Researchers have long been interested in understanding stability and change in self-esteem (e.g., Block & Robins, 1993; Demo, 1992; Huang, 2010; Wylie, 1979). The present chapter addresses several interrelated questions: How does self-esteem first emerge in childhood? How stable are individual differences in self-esteem? Does self-esteem show systematic changes across the lifespan? Do people from different generations (e.g., “baby boomers” vs. “millennials”) vary in their average level of self-esteem? Which factors influence the development of self-esteem? Does self-esteem matter for people’s lives? These issues have been debated in the literature for decades, with little progress toward resolution. Recently, however, a growing number of longitudinal studies have moved the field toward some consensus about many of the abiding questions in the study of self-esteem development. The goal of this chapter is to describe this emerging consensus by providing an overview of the major findings in the field.

Before we address these issues, we first turn to the definition of self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual’s subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person (e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2012). Here, the term “worth” is being used very broadly to simply mean a positive evaluation of any and all aspects of the self. Thus, self-esteem is by definition a subjective construct and does not necessarily reflect a person’s objective characteristics and competencies, or how a person is evaluated by others. It is therefore important to distinguish self-esteem from narcissism, as both constructs involve positive self-evaluations (Orth, Robins, Meier, & Conger, 2016; Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004). Whereas self-esteem refers to feelings of self-acceptance and self-respect, narcissism is characterized by feelings of superiority, grandiosity, self-centeredness, entitlement, and lack of empathy (Ackerman et al., 2011; Bosson et al., 2008). Thus, although high self-esteem is
compatible with a prosocial, positive attitude towards others, narcissism is linked to antisocial tendencies (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Paulhus et al., 2004; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). The definition of self-esteem as a subjective evaluation is consistent with how self-esteem is typically assessed, that is, using self-report measures (for a review, see Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2015). For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the most commonly used measure, includes statements such as “I take a positive attitude toward myself” and “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.” To take another example, the Lifespan Self-Esteem Scale by Harris, Donnellan, and Trzesniewski (2017)—a measure that has been developed for surveying participants of all ages, beginning with children as young as 5 years—includes questions such as “How do you feel about yourself?” and “How do you feel about the kind of person you are?”

Researchers often distinguish between global and domain-specific self-esteem. Whereas global self-esteem refers to an individual’s overall evaluation of his or her worth, domain-specific self-esteem refers to an individual’s evaluation of his or her worth in specific domains such as peer relationships, intellectual ability, and physical appearance. Wherever possible in this chapter, we discuss findings for both global and domain-specific self-esteem.

**How Does Self-Esteem Emerge Early in Life?**

An important but insufficiently understood question is how children first develop a global sense of their worth. Behavioral genetic research suggests that both genetic and environmental factors influence global self-esteem, but that environmental factors account for more variance than genetic factors, with the heritability of self-esteem estimated to be about 40% (Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1998; McGuire, Neiderhiser, Reiss, Hetherington, & Plomin, 1994; Neiss,
However, as yet, there is little evidence about the specific mechanisms that account for the emergence of self-esteem early in life. In the following, we outline two possible models.

To subjectively experience low or high self-esteem, children must have developed a self-concept, that is, a set of mental representations that include at least basic beliefs about who they are physically, psychologically, and socially (Coughlin & Robins, 2017). The literature suggests that children’s domain-specific self-evaluations can be assessed at an earlier age than global self-esteem (Donnellan et al., 2015). Whereas domain-specific self-evaluations (e.g., “I am good at counting”) have been assessed beginning at about age 4 years, researchers traditionally have assumed that global self-esteem cannot be measured reliably before about age 8 (Harter & Pike, 1984; but see Harris et al., 2017). Thus, a first model of the emergence of global self-esteem (which we call the bottom-up model) includes the proposition that, as young children develop their self-concept, they form beliefs about their abilities, talents, and stable characteristics in specific domains (such as sports, academic abilities, appearance, and peer relationships), based on their experiences in these domains as well as feedback they receive from caregivers, teachers, and peers. The bottom-up model states that later, at about age 7 or 8, children begin to aggregate their self-evaluations across domains, leading gradually to the development of global feelings of self-esteem. However, empirical studies do not generally support the assumption that domain-specific self-evaluations are the basis for global self-esteem (Harris, Wetzel, Robins, Donnellan, & Trzesniewski, 2017; Marsh & Yeung, 1998). Moreover, when predicting people’s global self-esteem on the basis of their domain-specific self-evaluations, a large part of the variance remains unexplained, suggesting that global self-esteem is more than the sum of domain-specific self-evaluations (Luciano & Orth, 2016; Pelham & Swann, 1989).
Given that the bottom-up model is difficult to reconcile with empirical findings, we now consider a second, fundamentally different model, which we call the *internalization of early social experiences model*. This model suggests that a child’s global sense of self-esteem does not evolve from domain-specific self-evaluations, but rather is shaped by early experiences in important interpersonal relationships. This model has its roots in a diverse range of theoretical perspectives, including attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and symbolic interactionism (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Attachment theory suggests that secure attachment to the caregiver leads to the construction of a positive internal working model of the self, that is, the representation that the self is valuable and deserving of love and care from close others (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Marvin & Britner, 2008). Even if children are not able to verbally express their general feelings of self-worth at age 4 or 5 years, children’s global self-esteem might be an automatic and preconscious reflection of the quality of their experiences with their primary caregivers.

Similarly, symbolic interactionism suggests that children’s relationship experiences with their parents and “significant others” influence the development of their self-esteem (Cooley, 1902). Specifically, the impressions of our early caregivers serve as a “looking glass,” reflecting back an image of ourselves that is then internalized and serves as the basis for self-esteem. Although symbolic interactionists viewed the internalization of other’s views as a life-long process of self construction, both attachment theory and symbolic interactionism share the view that early experiences of social evaluation and connection are particularly critical for the development of a child’s general tendency to feel valuable versus worthless. More generally, these perspectives suggest that global self-esteem is co-constructed through relational processes that first emerge in childhood, but persist across the lifespan (Harris et al., in press).
Supporting the internalization of early social experiences model, research suggests that the quality of parenting is a key factor that influences the development of self-esteem. For example, longitudinal studies have found that parental warmth, parental support, and support of children’s autonomy predict higher self-esteem among children (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Amato & Fowler, 2002; Brummelman et al., 2015; but see Harris et al., 2015). Longitudinal evidence also suggests that the effect of parenting quality experienced during the first years of life persists as children grow up and become adults (Orth, 2017). In that study, which used data from a national sample from the U.S., interviews with mothers and behavioral observation were used to gain information about the family environment during children’s first years of life. Later, children’s self-esteem was assessed biannually from age 8 to 27 years. The most important predictor of later self-esteem was the quality of the home environment, including quality of parenting and cognitive stimulation. Although the predictive effect became smaller as children became older, the effect was still present during young adulthood and statistical modeling indicated that it should persist into midlife and perhaps even old age. Moreover, quality of the home environment partially accounted for the effects of other features of the early childhood family environment, such as quality of the parental relationship, maternal depression, and poverty. These findings suggest that the family environment in early childhood shapes the long-term development of individual differences in self-esteem. In future research, it would be interesting to test models of the emergence of global self-esteem early in life in more detail. The importance of early family environment is also apparent in the case of Suzy, whose parents divorced when she was in her early teenage years, around the time her troubles with self-esteem first emerged. When talking about the environment that she created for her own children, Suzy said, “We were lucky. We had a very good family unit with them growing up, and that meant an
awful lot to me that I was able to do that for them, because I never had it for myself” (Apted, 2012).

**How Stable are Individual Differences in Self-Esteem?**

One question that comes to mind while watching the Up series is the degree to which the participants who appear insecure as children grow up to become adolescents and adults who are similarly plagued by self-doubts; and, conversely, whether those brimming with self-confidence as children remain self-assured later in life. More specifically, we can ask whether participants who had high (or low) self-esteem (compared to the other participants) when they were age 7 or 14, still have high (or low) self-esteem (compared to the other participants) at age 21, 28, or even 56. This question can be addressed by examining the degree to which individuals maintain their rank ordering over time, which is typically assessed using test-retest correlations.

Although some have argued that self-esteem fluctuates from situation to situation like our emotions (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), research suggests that the rank-order stability of self-esteem is quite high, even across long periods of time. In a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies and in analyses with several large representative samples, the rank-order stability of self-esteem was estimated as .64, corrected for measurement error (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003), which is comparable to the rank-order stability of basic personality traits. Moreover, Trzesniewski et al. (2003) found that the rank-order stability of self-esteem varies as a function of age; it is relatively low in childhood, increases across adolescence, peaks in adulthood, and then decreases in old age. Overall, this developmental pattern in the rank-order stability of self-esteem corresponds to findings on other personality characteristics such as the Big Five domains (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011).
However, although test-retest correlations provide important information, more sophisticated statistical models are needed to fully understand the stability of individual differences in self-esteem. For example, we know that test-retest correlations typically decrease as the time lag between assessments increases, but a key question is whether the stability of a construct ever approaches zero. If stability asymptotes at a non-zero level, this suggests that an underlying “trait” factor (or some other constant factor such as genetics or a nonchanging environment) accounts for stable individual differences in the construct. Using data from a large sample assessed six times across almost 30 years, Kuster and Orth (2013) found that the long-term stability of self-esteem approached an asymptotic value of about .40. Thus, as the time interval increased, test-retest correlations first quickly decreased but then leveled off at a medium-sized value for intervals of several decades (instead of dropping to zero). This value, which replicated for women and men, is similar in magnitude to that found for the Big Five personality traits (Anusic & Schimmack, 2016; Fraley & Roberts, 2005). In other words, the evidence suggests that individual differences in self-esteem are relatively stable, even if these differences are tracked over long periods, such as from young adulthood to midlife or even to old age. Thus, self-esteem, like other aspects of personality, is best conceptualized as a trait-like construct. It should be noted that the study by Kuster and Orth (2013) did not include participants younger than 14 years and that it is unknown whether the findings apply also to child samples. Evidence from Trzesniewski et al. (2003) and Fraley and Roberts (2005) suggests that the long-term stability of individual differences in self-esteem may be significantly lower in childhood compared to later developmental periods.

Another way to assess the rank-order stability of a construct is using latent trait-state models, which partition interindividual variance into stable (trait) and unstable (state)
Three longitudinal studies have used latent trait-state models to examine the stability of self-esteem across long periods (Donnellan, Kenny, Trzesniewski, Lucas, & Conger, 2012; Kuster & Orth, 2013; Wagner, Lüdtke, & Trautwein, 2016). The results of the three studies converged in showing strong trait effects (70 to 85% of the interindividual variance), and relatively weak state effects (15 to 30% was pure state variance or measurement error). Overall, then, the evidence reviewed in this section supports the notion that self-esteem is an enduring personality characteristic.

**Does Self-Esteem Show Systematic Changes Across the Lifespan?**

Although individual differences in self-esteem are relatively stable—as reviewed in the previous section—the average level of self-esteem might change systematically across the life course. Thus, with regard to the Up series, it is possible that the 14 participants maintained their ordering relatively to each other, but, as a group, their self-esteem tended to increase or decrease from one developmental period to the next. This type of change is referred to as mean-level or normative change.

For a long time, the literature suggested that people’s self-esteem does not show normative changes in any developmental period from childhood to old age (Wylie, 1979). A first study that significantly challenged this notion was based on analyses of cross-sectional data from more than 320,000 individuals who had completed a self-esteem questionnaire on the Internet (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). The findings suggested that, on average, self-esteem decreases from childhood to adolescence, recovers slightly in young adulthood, increases during middle adulthood, reaches a peak at about age 65 years, and declines sharply in old age. However, as is true for all cross-sectional analyses, the findings provide only a snapshot of age differences at a given point in time. Consequently, an important methodological problem
is that the observed age differences may reflect cohort differences (i.e., differences due to when a
person was born) not changes due to growing older. For example, participants who were 65 years
old when the data were collected and who reported the highest self-esteem scores of all adult
participants, may have had high self-esteem all along because of differing sociocultural
conditions when they were young (e.g., because of favorable economic or parenting conditions).
Thus, it is possible that the observed increase in self-esteem scores from adolescence to middle
adulthood does not reflect developmental change (i.e., aging), but differences in the cohorts
being studied at these ages. To resolve this problem, longitudinal data are needed. This is one
reason why the Up series is so powerful—you can see the participants aging from one film to the
next, across five decades of life.

To date, three longitudinal studies have tracked the trajectory of self-esteem across the
lifespan (Orth, Maes, & Schmitt, 2015; Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Orth, Trzesniewski, &
Robins, 2010). All three studies included large samples assessed multiple times across periods
ranging from 4 to 16 years. The participants ranged in age from adolescence to old age in two
studies, and from young adulthood to old age in the third. The analyses were based on latent
growth modeling, using the information from all participants simultaneously to model a single
trajectory across the entire observed age range (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2006; Preacher,
Wichman, MacCallum, & Briggs, 2008). All studies tested competing growth models, including
models with no change, and models with linear, quadratic, and cubic change. All three studies
provided evidence for an inverted U-shaped trajectory, in which self-esteem increases from
adolescence to midlife, peaks at about age 50 to 60, and decreases in old age. Across studies, the
increase from adolescence to midlife had an effect size ranging from about 0.30 to 0.50
(expressed as d; Cohen, 1992), and the decrease from midlife to old age corresponded to an
effect size ranging from about −0.20 to −0.70 (thus, varying more strongly across studies). This pattern is also supported by longitudinal studies that focused on self-esteem development during specific developmental stages, such as adolescence and young adulthood (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012; Chung, Hutteman, van Aken, & Denissen, 2017; Chung et al., 2014; Erol & Orth, 2011; Kiviruusu, Huurre, Aro, Marttunen, & Haukkala, 2015; Wagner, Lüdtke, Jonkmann, & Trautwein, 2013; Zeiders, Umaña-Taylor, & Derlan, 2013) and old age (von Soest, Wagner, Hansen, & Gerstorf, 2017; Wagner, Gerstorf, Hoppmann, & Luszcz, 2013; Wagner, Hoppmann, Ram, & Gerstorf, 2015; Wagner, Lang, Neyer, & Wagner, 2014).

With regard to the self-esteem trajectory in childhood and early adolescence, however, the evidence from longitudinal studies is less clear. Although some studies showed that self-esteem decreases during childhood and the transition into adolescence (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Marsh, 1989; Marsh, Barnes, Cairns, & Tidman, 1984)—for example, it seems that Suzy’s self-esteem declined from age 7 to 14)—other studies have failed to find the self-esteem drop from childhood to adolescence (Cole et al., 2001; Huang, 2010; Kuzucu, Bontempo, Hofer, Stallings, & Piccinin, 2014), and other studies have found that self-esteem decreases for girls but increases for boys (Block & Robins, 1993). To help reconcile these conflicting findings, Orth, Erol, and Luciano (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of all longitudinal studies to date and did not find support for the hypothesis that self-esteem declines during childhood. Instead, the meta-analytic findings suggest that mean levels of self-esteem increase slightly from the preschool years to middle childhood, are stable (but do not decline) during early and middle adolescence, and then begin to increase around age 15 and continue to increase into adulthood, a pattern that did not differ by gender. Future research should test whether this pattern holds for the childhood trajectory of domain-specific self-esteem.
Why does self-esteem show a steady uptrend from late adolescence to middle age? To date, no theories that focus specifically on the development of self-esteem during adulthood have been proposed. However, important background is provided by theory from the broader context of personality development (Specht et al., 2014). In particular, neo-socioanalytic theory suggests that adults typically develop in the direction of mature personality traits, especially during young adulthood (Roberts & Wood, 2006; see also Roberts & Caspi, in press). The reason is that adult individuals assume many social roles, such as relationship partner, parent, and employee, and that social roles involve expectations about appropriate behavior. For most social roles, these expectations include agreeableness, conscientiousness, assertiveness, and emotional stability (i.e., mature personality traits). Given that people are typically committed to satisfying these expectations, many adults gradually improve on these traits. Especially in young adulthood, individuals transition into many of these social roles, by entering into working life, committing to a stable romantic relationship, having a baby, and taking over additional social roles in the community (Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, & Specht, 2014). Given that mature personality traits are positively correlated with higher self-esteem (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002), neo-socioanalytic theory suggests that adults gradually improve in their self-esteem, especially during young adulthood.

More research is needed regarding old age. Although most studies have found that self-esteem declines in old age, especially in very old age, the magnitude of the decline differs considerably across studies (Orth et al., 2010, 2012, 2015; von Soest et al., 2017; Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013; Wagner, Hoppmann, et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2014). This issue is highly relevant, because if many elderly experience profound drops in self-esteem and serious self-doubts at the end of life, these changes may contribute to declining levels of well-being and the
emergence of depressive symptoms (Orth & Robins, 2013; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). This may be particularly true for an individual like Suzy, who has struggled with self-esteem issues throughout her life but seems to be doing well at mid-life—is she someone who may be particularly likely to lose some of her hard-earned self-worth as she enters old age?

The example of Suzy illustrates the importance of understanding not only the typical magnitude of the old-age decline in self-esteem, but the conditions that ameliorate or exacerbate the decline. It is possible that some of the variability in the observed effect sizes reflect cultural, social, and economic differences between the countries in which the data were collected. For example, attitudes towards older people, pension schemes, and the quality of the health care system could influence whether people maintain their self-esteem, experience a benign reduction, or suffer a significant loss in self-worth as they grow old. In fact, research suggests that differences in socioeconomic status, physical health, cognitive abilities, and perceived control over one’s life account for at least some differences in the self-esteem trajectory in old age (Orth et al., 2010; Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013; Wagner, Hoppmann, et al., 2015). More precisely, the self-esteem decline was very small when older adults did not experience negative changes in their income, health, and cognitive abilities, and control over their life (Orth et al., 2010). In future research, it will be important to gain a better understanding of the individual, social, and cultural factors that influence the old-age trajectory.

In addition to chronological age (i.e., age in years since birth), Wagner and colleagues found that the time remaining in a person’s life (i.e., the temporal distance to death) predicts the old-age decline in self-esteem (Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013; Wagner, Hoppmann, et al., 2015), perhaps because some of the factors that influence self-esteem are adversely affected by declines in cognitive and physical functioning during the last years of life (Gerstorf et al., 2008).
Although such analyses can be conducted only retrospectively, that is, using data from individuals who are already deceased, when available, both chronological age and distance to death should be examined in studies of self-esteem in old age.

A question that has rarely been explored in the literature is whether other aspects of self-esteem besides its level (i.e., high vs. low) vary as a function of age. People differ not only in their level of self-esteem, but also in the degree to which their self-esteem fluctuates over time and is contingent on external feedback. Notably, Suzy’s life seems like a roller coaster of ups and downs in self-esteem, whereas other participants in the Up series seems to have maintained a more consistent level. Findings based on data from a large diary study suggest that self-esteem not only increases from adolescence to middle adulthood, it also becomes more stable and less contingent (Meier, Orth, Denissen, & Kühnel, 2011). We note, however, that this finding was based on a cross-sectional study, and only longitudinal research can demonstrate that the increase in stability and decline in contingency reflect developmental change rather than cohort differences.

Another neglected question is whether domain-specific and global self-esteem show a similar developmental trajectory across the lifespan. For the adolescent period, the evidence is inconsistent. Whereas some studies have found similar domain-specific and global self-esteem trajectories (Steiger, Allemand, Robins, & Fend, 2014; von Soest, Wichstrom, & Kvalem, 2016), other studies suggest that the trajectories differ, in part because the various domains sometimes follow different trajectories (Cole et al., 2001; Harris, Wetzel, et al., 2017; Kuzucu et al., 2014). For example, Harris, Wetzel, et al. (2017) found decreases in physical appearance and academic self-esteem, no change in same-sex peer relationships, and a slight increase in opposite-sex peer relationship self-esteem. The studies by Cole et al. (2001) and Kuzucu et al. (2014) suggest that
self-esteem in the domain of behavioral conduct declines significantly during adolescence, whereas academic and social self-esteem increases.

Regarding adulthood, researchers have mostly ignored the development of domain-specific self-esteem. In a recent study on age differences from 16 to 90 years, academic self-esteem showed a trajectory similar to global self-esteem (increasing in young and middle adulthood, decreasing in old age), whereas self-esteem in the domains of physical appearance and physical ability decreased continuously (Luciano & Orth, 2016). Moreover, whereas academic self-esteem was strongly correlated with global self-esteem across the whole life course, for physical appearance and physical ability the correlations with global self-esteem decreased significantly with age. However, more research is needed to clarify how domain-specific self-esteem develops across the lifespan and the ways in which it is linked to the development of global self-esteem. Despite some gaps in the literature, the field is converging on the view that global self-esteem generally increases from adolescence through adulthood and then declines in old age, and that contingent and unstable self-esteem shows a similar trajectory from adolescence to adulthood.

**Do People from Different Generations Vary in Self-Esteem?**

The Up series focuses on a cohort of children who were born in the late 1950s and thus largely grew up in the 1960s. To what extent did their generation influence the lives they led and the people they became? This is the kind of question that researchers ask when they study whether people born in different generations show systematic differences in their average level of self-esteem. Twenge (2006) has advanced the provocative claim that “Generation Me”—the cohort of individuals born in the 1970s to 1990s—are exceptionally confident and even narcissistic compared to previous generations. Although Twenge’s hypotheses on Generation Me
focus mainly on narcissism (for the debate, see, e.g., Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; Wetzel, Donnellan, Robins, & Trzesniewski, in press), Twenge and her collaborators have also proposed that there have been secular changes in self-esteem (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Interestingly, in 49 Up, Suzy reflects about her children and their generation, commenting: “I think what I admire about the young today is their confidence and that’s what I wished I’d had. They just seem to take life and deal with it” (Apted, 2009).

In fact, some sociocultural changes beginning around the 1970s raise the possibility that more recent generations might exhibit higher self-esteem than older generations (Gentile et al., 2010). For example, self-esteem has become a more prominent topic in the public and media, leading parents, childcare workers, and teachers to focus more strongly on the promotion of self-esteem among children and adolescents. Moreover, grade inflation in the educational system and increasing possibilities for self-presentation in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube might alter the typical way members of more recent generations (who use these websites and services more frequently than members of older generations) perceive themselves. All of these secular changes might alter the average self-esteem trajectory characterizing a particular generational cohort.

Fortunately, cohort-sequential longitudinal studies, where multiple cohorts of individuals are followed over time, provide a way to determine whether generational cohorts differ in their overall level of self-esteem and in the shape of the lifespan trajectory of self-esteem. In sum, the findings from four cohort-sequential longitudinal studies suggest that neither the overall level nor the shape of the self-esteem trajectory has changed across the cohorts born during the 20th century (Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth et al., 2010, 2012, 2015; but see Twenge, Carter, & Campbell,
Three of the studies covered large parts of the lifespan, whereas the study by Erol and Orth (2011) focused on adolescence and young adulthood. The null results on cohort effects are meaningful given the large samples (ranging from 1,800 to 7,100 participants), which provide ample statistical power. Moreover, two of the samples were nationally representative, strengthening the generalizability of the findings. Thus, with regard to self-esteem, cohort-sequential findings do not support the hypotheses about “Generation Me.” Studies with other research designs likewise suggest that more recent generations do not have higher self-esteem compared to older generations (Hamamura & Septarini, 2017; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). More generally, the findings suggest that it matters little whether Suzy, or anyone else, was born in the 1950s, or a generation before or after; her level of self-esteem, and the changes in self-esteem she exhibited during her life, are likely to have been quite similar.

**Which Factors Influence the Development of Self-Esteem?**

People differ significantly in the way their self-esteem changes over time. While Suzy declined in self-esteem during the transition to adolescence but then increased after entering young adulthood, the other members of the Up series exhibited quite different patterns. The variability in patterns of self-esteem development raises the question of which factors shape the individual trajectory of self-esteem. In this section, we will review evidence on the following sets of possible factors: (a) gender and ethnicity, (b) social relationships, (c) socioeconomic status, (d) work success, (e) stressful life events, and (f) cultural context.

Longitudinal research has frequently tested for gender differences in the self-esteem trajectory. Corresponding to meta-analyses of cross-sectional data (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999; Zuckerman, Li, & Hall, 2016), the longitudinal evidence suggests that the gender difference in self-esteem development is small but
DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM

robust, with boys and men reporting slightly higher self-esteem than girls and women, respectively (Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth et al., 2010, 2012, 2015; von Soest et al., 2016; Wagner, Lüdtke, et al., 2013). Moreover, the meta-analytic evidence suggests that the gender difference increases during childhood, peaks in adolescence (albeit at an overall small effect size, as reported above), and is again smaller in adulthood (Kling et al., 1999; Major et al., 1999; Zuckerman et al., 2016). However, even if gender accounts for a small difference in self-esteem, it is likely that gender does not influence self-esteem directly, but that correlated factors (e.g., lower status of women in some cultural contexts; differential treatment of men and women in school and work contexts; women’s awareness of gender discrimination) account for the effect (Zuckerman et al., 2016).

Similarly, using data from U.S. samples, longitudinal research has identified ethnic differences, that is, differences in the self-esteem trajectories of Americans of European, Hispanic, African, Asian, or Native descent (Erol & Orth, 2011; Orth et al., 2010; Shaw, Liang, & Krause, 2010). For example, the results suggested that African Americans, when compared to European Americans, experienced a stronger increase in young adulthood but also a stronger decrease in old age. Again, it is likely that the self-esteem effect is not directly due to ethnicity, but rather reflects social or economic factors that differ systematically across ethnic groups. A promising avenue for future research is to move beyond these between-group comparisons in self-esteem and explore ethnocultural variables that predict within-group variability in self-esteem. For example, Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, and Conger (in press) studied ethnic pride in Mexican-origin youth and found that 5th grade boys who were particularly proud of their ethnic heritage showed subsequent increases in self-esteem as they transitioned into adolescence (Hernández, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, in press).
Theoretical perspectives suggest that social relationships are a key factor influencing self-esteem. In addition to attachment theory and symbolic interactionism (discussed previously in the section on the emergence of self-esteem in early childhood), sociometer theory extends symbolic interactionism by postulating that self-esteem is an internal monitor of the degree to which the individual’s need for social inclusion is satisfied or threatened (Leary, 2004, 2012; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Longitudinal studies support central propositions of sociometer theory, suggesting that being socially included and valued by others leads to increases in self-esteem (Gruenenfelder-Steiger, Harris, & Fend, 2016; Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi, & Asendorpf, 2016; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). Moreover, longitudinal research suggests that romantic relationships might be particularly relevant in explaining self-esteem change in adulthood (Mund, Finn, Hagemeyer, Zimmermann, & Neyer, 2015; Schaffhuser, Wagner, Lüdtke, & Allemand, 2014). For example, two studies found that relationship transitions such as beginning a romantic relationship significantly influenced people’s self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017; Wagner, Becker, Lüdtke, & Trautwein, 2015). Importantly, these two studies used the statistical method of propensity score matching. This technique provides for relatively strong conclusions about causality because the treatment group (i.e., individuals who experienced the transition) and control group (i.e., individuals who did not experience the transition) are matched on a large number of covariates, thus mimicking the random assignment employed in experimental designs, and ruling out the possibility of selection effects (e.g., individuals with high vs. low self-esteem might differ in their propensity to have particular relationship experiences). In the study by Luciano and Orth (2017), the effect of beginning any romantic relationship was significant in the first year after the transition, but not in the second and third year. However, when comparing matched samples of participants who began a relationship that lasted for at least one year (thus,
presumably a more stable and fulfilling relationship) versus participants who remained single, the effect was much larger and persisted across the entire study period. Moreover, a recent study indicated that the context of romantic relationships—that is, the environment shared and partly created by both partners, such as size of social network, family characteristics, stressful life events, and financial conditions—influences both partners’ self-esteem (Orth, Erol, Ledermann, & Grob, in press). Thus, research to date strongly suggests that social relationships influence self-esteem.

The case of Suzy offers a nice illustration of the impact of transitioning into a stable, satisfying romantic relationship. Whereas Suzy seemed uneasy and dissatisfied with herself when interviewed at age 21, by age 28 she was much more relaxed and had found some peace of mind after having entered into a stable relationship with Rupert, with whom she has been married ever since (Apted, 2012). When asked by the interviewer at age 28, “When I last saw you at 21, you were nervous, you were chain-smoking, you were uptight, and now you seem happy. What’s happened to you over these last seven years?” she responds, “I suppose Rupert. I give him some credit” (Apted, 2009). The empirical evidence suggests that Rupert does indeed deserve some credit.

Socioeconomic status is also associated with self-esteem. Longitudinal studies show that individuals with higher income, education level, and occupational prestige tend to have higher self-esteem at all ages across the lifespan (Orth et al., 2010, 2012, 2015; Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2014), replicating meta-analytic findings based on cross-sectional data (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). However, because these longitudinal studies used socioeconomic status as a covariate of mean-level change in self-esteem, the findings are mute with regard to the hypothesized causal relation between the constructs. Two studies examined the possible effects
of socioeconomic status more directly, by testing prospective effects and controlling for prior levels of the variables; however, neither income nor occupational prestige prospectively predicted change in self-esteem (Kuster, Orth, & Meier, 2013; Orth et al., 2012). Thus, the available evidence does not suggest that socioeconomic status has a causal effect on self-esteem.

Similarly, extant research does not suggest that work success causally influences self-esteem, although the constructs are positively correlated (Judge & Bono, 2001). Two longitudinal studies have tested for prospective effects of work outcomes—subjective measures such as job satisfaction and work stress as well as objective measures such as employment status and supervisor status—but found small, and mostly non-significant, effects on self-esteem (Kuster et al., 2013; Orth et al., 2012).

Stressful life events such as experiencing a serious accident, contracting a chronic disease, and suffering from criminal victimization may entail loss of self-esteem, as suggested by longitudinal studies (Orth & Luciano, 2015; Pettit & Joiner, 2001; Tetzner, Becker, & Baumert, 2016). Importantly, these studies controlled for theoretically relevant third variables such as gender and socioeconomic status, increasing the validity of the conclusions. Moreover, a longitudinal study tested whether the birth of the first child—a life event that has positive connotations but is also considered a stressful event—affected self-esteem among new mothers and fathers (Bleidorn, Buyukcan-Tetik, et al., 2016). The findings suggested that self-esteem declined in the first year after childbirth (particularly among mothers) and continued to decrease gradually in the following years. These results were replicated in a recent study with a representative sample of Norwegian mothers, showing that the pattern of effects held not only for first-time mothers but also for mothers having their second, third, or later baby (van Scheppingen, Denissen, Chung, Tambs, & Bleidorn, 2017). This study also showed that the
DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM

decrease after childbirth was preceded by an increase during pregnancy and that changes in self-esteem were associated with changes in mothers’ relationship satisfaction. Moreover, as reviewed above, evidence suggests that a relationship breakup worsens people’s self-esteem, even when controlling for a large number of covariates (Luciano & Orth, 2017).

Research suggests that cultural contexts influence the prototypical self-concept among their members (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), potentially affecting the development of self-esteem. However, there is still a lack of longitudinal evidence on self-esteem development outside of Westernized countries. Cross-sectional studies suggest that, overall, the general pattern of self-esteem development replicates in many countries (Bleidorn, Arslan, et al., 2016; Robins et al., 2002). Nevertheless, there is evidence of cross-cultural variability in self-esteem development. Using data from nearly one million participants from about 50 countries, Bleidorn, Arslan, et al. (2016) found that socioeconomic and cultural-value characteristics of countries moderated the normative trajectory during young adulthood. Their findings suggested, for example, that women from countries with greater gender equality show larger increases in self-esteem during young adulthood compared to women from countries with more traditional gender roles. However, the causal status of the relation between culture and self-esteem is unclear due to the cross-sectional nature of the data.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that social relationships and stressful life events influence people’s self-esteem. Moreover, given the methodological characteristics of many of the relevant studies (e.g., controlling for prior levels of the variables, controlling for third variables, and using propensity score matching), the research provides relatively strong support for a causal interpretation of the effects. Nevertheless, there are many gaps in our knowledge of the personal, relational, social, and cultural influences on self-esteem
development, and whether there are critical developmental windows when presumed causal factors are particularly consequential.

**Does Self-Esteem Matter?**

The research reviewed in this chapter suggests that individual differences in self-esteem emerge early in life and become increasingly stable as children grow up and go through life. Thus, the findings suggest that self-esteem is a personality trait. But, is it a trait that truly matters for people’s lives? This question is critically important given that an earlier review concluded that, due to a lack of longitudinal studies at the time, self-esteem is “not a major predictor or cause of almost anything” (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003, p. 37) and that, subsequently, researchers have hotly debated whether self-esteem exerts any influence on important life outcomes (Krueger, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2008; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007, 2008). Since Baumeister et al.’s (2003) review, an increasing number of longitudinal studies have provided evidence that self-esteem does have consequences for a broad set of outcomes in people’s lives (for a review, see Orth & Robins, 2014). Specifically, researchers have examined the implications of self-esteem for social and romantic relationships (Johnson & Galambos, 2014; Marshall, Parker, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2014; Mund et al., 2015; Orth et al., 2012), education (Hernández et al., in press; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; von Soest et al., 2016), work (Kuster et al., 2013; Orth et al., 2012; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; von Soest et al., 2016), crime and delinquency (Donnellan et al., 2005; Trzesniewski et al., 2006), and health (Orth et al., 2012; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Moreover, a large body of research suggests that low self-esteem contributes to the development of depression (Orth et al., 2016; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Rieger, Göllner, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2016; Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Steiger et al., 2014; Wouters et al., 2013; for a review, see Orth & Robins, 2013).
Importantly, the studies cited above allow for strong conclusions about the consequences of self-esteem because many of them used large representative samples (often with more than 1,000 participants), aggregated the estimates across several waves of data, and controlled for prior levels of the constructs. Moreover, many studies controlled for theoretically relevant third variables (such as gender, socioeconomic status, intelligence, popularity among peers, and life events), ruling out alternative hypotheses about confounding effects of other influential factors. Thus, contrary to the conclusion of Baumeister et al. (2003), the findings suggest that high versus low self-esteem are not mere epiphenomena of success versus failure in important life domains, but that self-esteem plays a causal role in people’s experiences in social and romantic relationships, in their school and work life, and in the health domain. Note, however, that the prospective effects of self-esteem were typically of small to medium size. This is not surprising because, clearly, a multitude of factors influence success and well-being in life domains such as peer and romantic relationships, work, and health. However, it is theoretically and practically important to know that self-esteem is one of these factors. If self-esteem has real-world consequences then interventions aimed at strengthening people’s self-esteem should prove beneficial for the individual and, ultimately, society. In fact, meta-analytic evidence indicates that psychological interventions can improve people’s self-esteem and that effective interventions do not only result in improvements in self-esteem but also in other areas of functioning (Haney & Durlak, 1998; O’Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 2006).

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, research on self-esteem development has made considerable progress towards clarifying previously unresolved issues and reaching consensus about long-debated questions. The research reviewed in this chapter suggests that: (a) individual differences
in self-esteem are relatively stable across decades of life, indicating that self-esteem is a trait-like construct; (b) self-esteem has a genetic component, but environmental factors during early childhood explain, at least partially, individual differences in self-esteem that persist into adulthood; (c) despite its trait-like character, self-esteem shows normative change across the whole life course, increasing across large parts of the life span, peaking at about age 60 to 65 years and then decreasing in old age; (d) people from different generations do not differ in their average level of self-esteem or in the way their self-esteem changes across the lifespan; (e) social relationships, stressful life events, and important life transitions influence the development of self-esteem at all developmental periods; and (f) self-esteem is a causal force that influences people’s lives in the domains of relationships, work, and health.

We believe that the evidence accumulated in the field of self-esteem development is relatively strong, given the abundance of studies using longitudinal designs, large and representative samples (often from archival datasets openly available to the research community), and sophisticated statistical methods such as growth curve modeling, latent trait-state modeling, and propensity score matching. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done. For example, at the beginning of this chapter we discussed two possible models of how self-esteem emerges early in life. However, due to a lack of empirical research, these models are almost untested, and numerous additional models could be derived from other theoretical perspectives. Thus, future research should seek to better understand the emergence of self-esteem in early childhood. Moreover, although our review suggested that social relationships and major life events are factors influencing the development of self-esteem, the available evidence with regard to other factors such as work success and cultural context is scarce and inconsistent. For example, many theoretical perspectives predict that work experiences should have a causal effect
DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM

on self-esteem, given their relevance for people’s pretensions (James, 1890), their self-perceived competence (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) and their odds for social inclusion versus exclusion (Leary, 2012). However, more research on the potential self-esteem effect of work experiences is needed. Finally, research reviewed in this chapter suggests that self-esteem influences important life outcomes. However, the mechanisms by which self-esteem exerts its influence are insufficiently understood. Some of these mediating processes might operate on the intrapersonal level. For example, research suggests that low self-esteem strengthens the tendency to ruminate about failures and negative social feedback, which compromises the person’s well-being (Kuster, Orth, & Meier, 2012). However, other mediating processes might occur at the interpersonal level. For example, individuals with low self-esteem tend to withdraw in relationship conflicts, increasing the likelihood of relationship breakups (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Thus, an important task for future research is to examine the mechanisms through which self-esteem influences people’s lives.

In summary, the research reviewed in this chapter provides a clear counterpoint to the adage that inspired the Up series, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man.” Instead, we see evidence of both consistency and change. Although self-esteem shows some degree of stability across decades of life, its long-term stability is far from perfect. People’s self-esteem continues to change in meaningful and consequential ways from childhood through old age. A particularly poignant example is the case of Suzy, whose confidence and exuberance at age 7 hardly foretold the ups and downs in self-esteem she would experience over the course of her life.
References


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.106.4.766


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0020543


http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12074


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.1.80

http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291798007508


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.4.470


http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167213480189


DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.63.1.65


Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality, 76*, 875-901. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00507.x


von Soest, T., Wagner, J., Hansen, T., & Gerstorf, D. (2017). Self-esteem across the second half of life: The role of socioeconomic status, physical health, social relationships, and


