

INVITED SYMPOSIUM EARA 2018

The Self in Adolescence

Chair: Sander Thomaes, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Discussant: Jaap Denissen, Tilburg University, the Netherlands

Thursday September 13th, 13.30-15.00, Auditorium 3

“Who am I?” “What is my place in the world?” “What makes me a worthy person?” The formation of healthy (i.e., clear, non-defensive, authentic) self-views is a key developmental task for adolescents. How do they form self-views? And how do self-views shape their psychological and behavioral adjustment? The present symposium brings together a group of scholars who explore theoretically important but understudied aspects of the adolescent self: narcissism (i.e., the extent to which adolescents view themselves as superior), self-esteem contingency (i.e., the extent to which adolescents’ self-esteem is dependent upon approval), authenticity (i.e., the extent to which adolescents feel in alignment with their true self), and self-concept clarity (i.e., the extent to which adolescents’ self-concept is defined consistently and confidently). They use multiple methods, including daily diary, experimental, and longitudinal methods, to uncover the origins, nature, and consequences of adolescent self-views. Paper 1 (Brummelman et al.) uses experimental methods to investigate how youths’ narcissism influences their emotional responses to praise, as evident from their physiological blushing. Paper 2 (Van der Kaap-Deeder et al.) uses survey and experimental methods to investigate how youths’ contingent self-esteem influences motivational processes in academic settings. Paper 3 (Thomaes et al.) uses survey, daily diary, and experimental methods to investigate the origins and consequences of authenticity. Paper 4 (Becht et al.) uses longitudinal methods to investigate how youths’ self-concept clarity and the quality of their social relationships mutually shape each other. Together, the research presented here illustrates how the self can be thought of as a multifaceted psychological resource. Adolescent self-views sometimes challenge psychological adjustment, but can also contribute to adolescent learning, social adjustment, and emotional well-being. Healthy self-views help adolescents navigate successfully the vicissitudes of daily life.

PRESENTATION 1: Narcissistic blushing in youth

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Physiological responses can reveal emotional states that individuals are unwilling to admit to others. Here, we studied what *blushing* reveals about the emotional states of narcissistic children. Narcissistic children (i.e., those high on the personality trait of narcissism) have a pervasive sense of grandiosity. We theorized that narcissistic children are so invested in their sense of grandiosity that even modest praise can make them feel depreciated. Because they may not admit this feeling to others, we measured their physiological blushing: an involuntary reddening of the face that occurs when individuals anticipate being depreciated. Unlike other emotional expressions, blushing cannot be faked. We timed the study right around the transition to adolescence, when children become increasingly concerned about how they are evaluated by others. Children ($N = 105$) completed the Childhood Narcissism Scale and were then invited to sing a song on stage. They were randomly assigned to receive inflated praise (e.g., “You sang *incredibly* well!”), modest praise (“You sang well!”), or no praise for their performance. Blushing was recorded using photoplethysmography and temperature sensing. Afterwards, children were asked how much they thought they had blushed. As predicted, narcissistic children—unlike non-narcissistic children—blushed when they received modest praise, not when they received inflated praise. Specifically, they showed increased blood volume pulse (i.e., fast changes in blood volume with each heartbeat). Strikingly, when asked, narcissistic children denied blushing, perhaps to hide their vulnerabilities. Thus, blushing revealed social-evaluative concerns that narcissistic children wished to keep private. Interventions may encourage narcissistic children to adopt an open, nonjudgmental awareness of their negative feelings, so as to help them acknowledge, understand, and regulate those feelings more effectively.

PRESENTATION 2: The pursuit of self-esteem and its motivational implications

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Although recent studies have found contingent self-esteem (CSE) to be negatively related to individuals' well-being, research concerning its implications for motivation and engagement is scarce. In two studies, we investigated the relation between CSE, motivation, and engagement in achievement-related situations. A first cross-sectional study among second year high school students ($N = 641$; 54.1% female) confirmed the hypothesized motivational ambiguity associated with academic CSE. Beyond the contribution of academic self-esteem, academic CSE was positively related to behavioral and emotional engagement, but also to emotional disaffection and test anxiety. These associations could partially be explained by motivational quality, as CSE was also positively related to both autonomous and controlled types of motivation. In a second experimental study among university students ($N = 72$; 70.8% female), who participated in a tangram puzzle task under varying feedback circumstances, global CSE related to more tension, while predicting less behavioral task perseverance. These effects were not moderated by the type of feedback provided (i.e., positive vs. negative). Theoretical and practical implications of these results will be discussed.

PRESENTATION 3: Happy to be “Me?”

Authenticity, psychological need satisfaction, and subjective well-being in adolescence

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Adolescents have a strong desire to “be themselves.” How does experiencing authenticity—the sense of being one’s true self—influence subjective well-being? What allows adolescents to experience authenticity? This research tests a working model of how authenticity is implicated in adolescents’ well-being. Using survey, diary, and experimental methodologies, four studies (total $N = 759$, age-range = 12-17) supported the main tenets of the model. Authenticity (1) enhances well-being, (2) co-varies with satisfaction of psychological needs for relatedness and competence, and is caused by satisfaction of the need for autonomy, and (3) mediates the link between need satisfaction and well-being. Authenticity is more than a powerful motive for adolescents: It has robust, replicable effects on well-being, and may thus be a pervasive force in positive youth development.

PRESENTATION 4: Clear self, better relationships:

Adolescents' self-concept clarity and relationship quality with parents and peers across 5-years

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Aim: Establishing a clear sense of self is a key task of adolescence. An important aspect of the self is the degree of certainty or clarity, also referred to as self-concept clarity. Several theories on the self have emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships with parents and best friends for the development of SCC in adolescence (see Chen et al., 2006 for an overview), also referred to as a *parent/peer effects model*. At the same time, there is the commonly held notion that how we think about ourselves also affects social relationships, referred to as a *child effects model* and changes in clarity of the self may even precede changes in relationship quality during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Swann et al., 2007). Importantly, none of these perspectives have ever been tested longitudinally, which makes it difficult to substantiate claims regarding the direction of effects. How SCC and quality of relationships with parents and friends are influencing each other over time is therefore not well understood. Moreover, previous studies primarily studied these associations at the group level. Yet, if we want to gain knowledge on how dynamic processes between relationship quality and SCC operate within individuals, we need to study these linkages at the within-person level (Hamaker et al., 2015). Therefore, the aim of this study was to compare competing theoretical perspectives on the direction of effects between relationship quality and SCC across adolescence using a within-person modeling approach. **Method:** This multi-informant five-year longitudinal study (N = 497, $M_{age} = 13.03$ years at T1, 56.7% boys) involved adolescents', their parents and best-friend's reports of relationship quality. We tested reciprocal within-person longitudinal linkages, using a multi-level framework cross lagged panel model. **Results:** Results provided systematic evidence for both parent and child effects, with the direction of effects being strongly dependent on the relational context. For example, higher maternal support predicted higher SCC, supporting a parent effects perspective. In contrast, higher SCC predicted lower paternal negative interaction, supporting a child effects model. Peer effects on adolescent SCC were not consistently found across adolescent and best friend reports. **Conclusion:** Overall, results indicated bidirectional effects between quality of relationships and SCC. Yet, the direction of effects was largely dependent on the relational context. Results will be discussed in light of an increasing body of knowledge that adolescents increasingly shape their relationships with close others.