

Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to arrive at a broad understanding of the study of the self across the life span. For the researcher interested in studying the development of the self across the life span, there are many issues that must be addressed. One must first identify the most important characteristics and dimensions of the self. Then, attempts can be made to answer when and how the self is acquired, as well as what characterizes and affects its development.

For the past two decades, psychologists and other social scientists have devoted a great deal of attention to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral implications of the self. They have employed a large number of interesting and innovative methodological approaches and have studied the development of the self across all periods of the life span.

As these contributions to a companion volume, *The Self: Definitional and Methodological Issues* (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 1992), illustrate, any effort to study the self is affected by the answers which one gives to the questions of *what* to study and *how* to study it. Researchers differ widely in how they believe the self should be defined and measured. These differences also become very important when the question of *whom* to study is raised.

As previous theory and research have shown, the self can be defined in many different ways. Thus, when one studies the self across the life span, an important initial question concerns exactly *what* is to be studied. Several different answers to this question are offered in this volume.

For example, some contributors focus on the structural properties of the self (Ogilvie & Clark in chapter 6). Others emphasize some of the processing aspects of the self (Shirk & Renouf in chapter 2). Still others consider both the structural and processing aspects of the self (Anderson in chapter 1, and Mueller et al. in chapter 7). In

addition, some contributors (Demo & Savin-Williams in chapter 4; Lipka et al. in chapter 3; and Wells in chapter 5) devote their attention to self-esteem and self-evaluation, whereas others (Anderson in chapter 1, and Ogilvie & Clark in chapter 6) consider both the descriptive and evaluative aspects of the self.

One's definition of *what* to study both influences and is influenced by *how* it can or should be studied. Thus, even if researchers agree in principle about what they are studying, there are often disagreements about the best way in which to study it. For example, some structurally oriented contributors (Anderson in chapter 1) rely on open-ended interviews and self-descriptive tasks. Others rely on memory and reaction-time procedures (Mueller et al. in chapter 7). Some contributors who are interested in self-esteem rely on standardized questionnaires (Demo & Savin-Williams in chapter 4; Lipka et al. in chapter 3; and Shirk & Renouf in chapter 2). Others prefer interviews or a combination of questionnaire and interview (Anderson in chapter 1), and still others use techniques that do not even require a testing site or the presence of the investigator (Wells in chapter 5).

Beyond that which is discussed in this volume, most research on the development of the self has been concerned with the self in infancy, childhood, and adolescence (Honest & Yardley 1987). It is during these years when most of the action regarding the development of the self is assumed to be occurring. For example, research with infants attempts to establish the onset of visual self-recognition and knowledge of self and others (Harter 1983; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn 1979; Ryce-Menuhin 1988).

One of the commonly observed findings in developmental research into the self is that, from childhood to adolescence, the person's understanding of self changes from an emphasis on concrete, external, and overt dimensions (such as behavior and physical attributes) to an emphasis on more internal, psychological, and covert dimensions (such as traits and attitudes) (Bannister & Agnew 1977; Livesley & Bromley 1973; Montemayor & Eisen 1977; Rosenberg 1979). Developmental differences in the self have also been associated with different cognitive abilities and structural processes (Damon & Hart 1986; Harter 1983).

How do the selves of those who are five, ten, twenty, forty, and eighty years of age differ from each other? What are the theoretical and developmental implications of the use of quite different methodologies with different age groups?

In an effort to address these questions, we have included selections in this volume that focus not only on the early stages of the life span, but also on adulthood and old age as well. Recent research from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives is presented. There are three sections to the volume, including early and middle childhood, late childhood and adolescence, and adulthood and old age.

How can we study the selves of very young children? In the first part of her chapter 1, Anderson reviews the conceptual and methodological issues in studying the self in early childhood. She notes that there are differences between the two developmental periods of the preverbal infant and the verbal preschooler when studied separately. The major conceptual issues here concern the developing awareness of the self as an agent and object as well as the impact on the self of the emergence of verbal and other cognitive abilities. Her presentation of the unique methodological challenges to studying the self in early childhood is especially interesting.

One important question about the self in childhood concerns the relationship between cognitive complexity and self-evaluation. As the structure of the self increases in complexity, what effect does this have on the child's self-esteem? In the major part of her chapter, Anderson proposes that the intensity of feelings attached to specific components of the self are affected by the complexity and integration of the self. She tests this proposition by examining the differential effects of receiving a school report card on the self-esteem of third- and sixth-grade students.

During the transition from childhood to early adolescence, there are a great many changes in the person (Blyth & Traeger 1983). In addition to new role requirements, the child develops more sophisticated reasoning and cognitive abilities and begins to show the bodily transformations that characterize puberty (Simmons & Blyth 1987). What effects do these changes have on the self of the early adolescent?

In their chapter 2, Shirk and Renouf describe the effects of these changes in terms of a series of pivotal socioemotional tasks that affect the self. Central to these tasks are concerns about mastery and identity formation. Shirk and Renouf describe how, during this period, accurate self-evaluations, feelings of competence and self-worth, conservation of self, and the maintenance of positive self-esteem have important implications for both development and mental health.

In addition to more sophisticated cognitive abilities and pivotal socioemotional tasks, researchers have also been interested in the impact of contextual and situational factors (Gecas 1982; Markus & Kunda 1986; McGuire 1984). Chapter 3, by Lipka and his colleagues, falls into this latter tradition. In particular, they are interested in the effects of school transition on the self-esteem of early adolescents. Much debate has arisen over the extent to which changes in school structure (in addition to or as opposed to age changes) have positive or negative effects on self-esteem. Lipka and his colleagues examine this question by comparing not only students with different school-organization experiences but also students of different ages within the same grade.

There has been a great deal of controversy over whether adolescence is a period of storm and stress for the self. In their review and integration of the research surrounding this controversy, Demo and Savin-Williams argue in chapter 4 that, except in early adolescence, the self during this period is characterized by growth, stability, and increasing self-acceptance. Despite this conclusion, they note that there are several unresolved conceptual and methodological issues concerning the self in adolescence. They suggest several areas of research in which increased attention can help to resolve the controversies that still remain.

As we move from studying the self in childhood and adolescence to studying the self in adulthood and old age, a whole set of new and quite different issues emerges. The idea that the self continues to develop throughout life has led to much recent interest in studying the self in later life (Breytspraak 1984; Whitbourne 1986). Most of this research emphasizes the effects of life events and transitions on the self. For example, researchers have considered the effects of occupational changes, changing family responsibilities, the death of one's spouse or parents, retirement, and a variety of other crises, dilemmas, and role changes on the self (Meyer 1986; Rossan 1987; Wells & Stryker 1988).

Is it accurate to speak of the self as developing all across the life span? One might argue, for example, that, if development is defined as the acquisition of new perceptual, memory, and reasoning abilities, then after adolescence the self does not develop any further.

The adult self is not really getting any "bigger or better"—or is it? How does it change during adulthood, other than by adding new experiences and events and by utilizing new interpretations of past experiences and events? As one ages, does the self reverse its devel-

opment? Are aspects of the self that were previously held now lost? Does self become obsolete in old age (Esposito 1987)? These are the types of issues that emerge when we study the adult self.

In her chapter 5, Wells presents a conceptualization and methodology for studying the fluctuations in self-esteem across the life span and in different contexts and settings. She reports a study designed to investigate the variations in self-esteem of a group of working mothers as they went about their daily lives. Among her more important findings is that self-esteem varies as a function of specific activities as well as specific persons with whom the mothers were interacting. An important aspect of her research is that it is based on an innovative and relatively recent methodological approach to studying the self in naturalistic settings called the *Experience Sampling Method*.

To the extent that young adulthood is a time of looking forward to the future and that older adulthood is a time of looking back toward the past, what are the resulting implications for the self? Ogilvie and Clark address this question in their chapter 6 on age and sex differences in individuals' perceptions of ideal and undesired selves. They review previous research on real-ideal self-discrepancies as well as their own research showing that the real-undesired self-discrepancy is more strongly related to life-satisfaction than the latter, especially among females. In considering age differences, it seems that young adults believe that their best selves are yet to come in the future, whereas older adults believe that their best selves were realized in the past. This suggests that the self plays a differential role in the motivations and evaluations of young and older adults.

Finally, Mueller and his colleagues compare, in chapter 7, the information-processing aspects of the self among young and elderly adults. They are especially interested in how memory is affected by the self, and they describe a program of interesting studies designed to identify why the self is not as effective of a memory aid for elderly subjects as it is for young adults. Among the possible reasons for this difference which they investigate are that the elderly are less self-conscious than are young adults, and that there are differences between young and elderly adults in the structure and content of their selves. The work of Mueller and his colleagues is an important extension of experimental cognitive methodology to studying the self across the life span.

In summary, this volume explores the study of the self in childhood and old age, as well as during most points in between.

Although some aspects of the life span—such as postcollege, pregeriatric adulthood—are given only minimal attention, we have tried to cover as many of the distinct stages of the life span as space permits. In addition, because we have attempted to present a mixture of methodological, theoretical, and developmental concerns, some of these chapters are primarily reviews and some are primarily research reports. We think that this variety presents a useful balance for a volume of this kind.

Finally, there are some common themes in this volume that should be noted in advance. Primary among these are the issues of gender and its relation to the self, and stereotypes about the self at different stages of the life span. In terms of gender, several of the contributors report interesting differences between the selves of males and females across many domains. In addition, several contributors address common conceptions (and misconceptions) about the self, such as adolescence as a time of storm and stress and old age as a time of memory deficits. We shall return to these issues in chapter 8 as a final summary.

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