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STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE ADOLESCENT'S SELF-IMAGE

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A longitudinal study of changes in the structure of the self-image included 49 students studied in the sixth grade and as high-school seniors. Self and ideal-self descriptions, obtained on parallel forms (preadolescent and adolescent) of a questionnaire designed to control several response sets, provided measures of self-esteem and social-personal orientation. Over the 6-year period, as predicted, girls showed an increase in social orientation while boys increased in personal orientation, reflecting the different processes of personality development for adolescent boys and girls. Self-esteem, however, was independent of sex role. Adolescents low in self-esteem more frequently characterized others in terms of personal reference and/or derogatory attitudes on the Role Construct Repertory Test.

Current personality theory defines as a central problem of adolescence the task of achieving a sense of personal identity. While the psychological processes involved in consolidating a sense of identity cannot, as yet, be fully specified, one reflection of the basic personality change might be found by observing continuities and changes in the self concept during this developmental period.

Surprisingly little is known about stability and change in the self concept during adolescence. The basic problem would seem to require longitudinal study of the structure of the self concept over a period of adolescent development. Such longitudinal studies are rare, however, and at present the major empirical work is represented by Engel's (1959) study. Engel found a relatively high degree of stability in adolescents' Q-sort self-descriptions over a 2-year period and found indicators of self concept related to adjustment but independent of age, sex, and intelligence within her sample. The implications of Engel's findings—that the self concept remains stable through adolescence and is unrelated to sex role—are limited

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by certain problems of method. The developmental period encompassed only a 2-year span, and the conceptualization of "self concept" was apparently limited to a dimension of self-esteem. A further problem derives from her self-concept measure, built upon the adolescent's ordering of clearly favorable or unfavorable self-descriptive statements. Thus some of the stability observed may represent the Ss response in terms of fairly transparent social desirability of the items.

The present paper reports a longitudinal study that attempts a more-differentiated conception of stability and change in the self concept of the adolescent. Basically, the study examines the "fate" of two independent dimensions of the self-image—social versus personal orientation and self-esteem—over a 6-year period of adolescent development and seeks evidence bearing upon the construct validity of these concepts.

In a previous study of preadolescents (Carlson, 1963), social-personal orientation and self-esteem, conceptually independent dimensions of the self-image, were shown to be related to the quality of the preadolescent's parental identification and to his sociometric status. Social orientation refers to the salience of interpersonal experiences in the individual's conceptions of himself and implies a degree of vulnerability to social appraisals, while personal orientation refers to conceptions of self which are independent of concern with social experiences. Self-esteem here refers to the correspondence between one's present concept of self and his self-ideals. A major expectation of the present study is that these two dimensions of self develop in different ways during the adolescent years.

Current personality theory and research would suggest that social-personal orientation is linked to sex-role differentiation during this period. Important differences in definitions of social sex roles center upon the emphasis upon autonomy, activity, and independence in males and the emphasis upon social sensitivity, passivity, and conformity in females. In terms of the present research variables, the stereotype of the masculine role implies a personal orientation; the stereotype of the feminine role implies a social orientation. Evidence supporting this expectation of sex differences comes from studies (Hovland & Janis, 1959) that suggest that, among adults, men are relatively autonomous and independent, while women tend to be more conforming, persuasible, and field-dependent. At the adolescent level, Douvan (1960) found ego integration among adolescent boys related to the development of personal, independent standards, while ego integration in girls was linked to interpersonal skill and sensitivity. However, in research with younger children, Carlson (1963) found the majority of preadolescent subjects personally oriented, with no evidence for sex differences in social-personal orientation. Apparently, then, it is during adolescence that sex differentiation on this dimension occurs. This reasoning led to Hypothesis 1: over a 6-year period of adoles-

cent development girls show an increase in social orientation and boys show an increase in personal orientation.

In contrast to social-personal orientation, the second major variable, self-esteem, is conceptualized as independent of sex role. While males and females may be expected to differ in the content of their self-perceptions and self-ideals, the degree of congruence between self-perceptions and self-ideals should be comparable for the sexes. Hypothesis 2 predicted that the level of self-esteem and the stability of self-esteem over a 6-year period would be independent of sex.

Two hypotheses were concerned with the relationship of social-personal orientation to other aspects of personality. From assumptions about the developmental tasks of preadolescents, as compared with those of adolescents, one would expect the correlates of social-personal orientation to differ at the two developmental levels. For the preadolescent, as yet relatively unconcerned with assuming adult sex-role expectations, a major task is the development of competence and autonomy. Here a socially oriented self concept would imply an overreliance upon social experiences in defining the self and thus a potential instability of self-esteem. The adolescent, on the other hand, is establishing an identity consonant with culturally defined masculine and feminine adult roles. Here the sex of the individual would be expected to mediate the relationship between social-personal orientation and stability of self-esteem. Specifically, social orientation in adolescent girls would not connote instability of self-esteem, since a social orientation is thought to be a component of the feminine role. For the boy, however, a socially oriented self-image implies a degree of "failure" in his developmental task of achieving the independence and autonomy of the masculine role and thus should be associated with devalued self-esteem. Hypothesis 3 predicted that social orientation in the preadolescent is associated with a drop in the level of self-esteem over a 6-year period among both boys and girls and that social orientation in adolescence is associated with devalued self-esteem in boys, but not in girls.

A further correlate of social orientation is expected in the adolescent's perceptions of other people. Presumably, the socially oriented individual is relatively sensitive to "interpersonal" qualities of those around him, while the personally oriented individual is more likely to perceive others in terms of objective characteristics or "individual" qualities. Hypothesis 4 predicted that socially oriented adolescents more frequently use "interpersonal" constructs in their perceptions of others than do personally oriented adolescents.

Individual differences in the level of self-esteem are assumed to influence the quality of the individual's relationships with others. The adolescent who is low in self-esteem is expected to be relatively anxious, self-conscious, and more ready to interpret interpersonal experiences in an "egocentric" fashion. Two specific predictions explored this aspect of self-

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esteem. Hypothesis 5 predicted that adolescents low in self-esteem should more frequently show "egocentric" perceptions of other people. Hypothesis 6 predicted that low self-esteem Ss should more often disclose their identities in responding to an anonymous questionnaire.

METHOD

Subjects

The preadolescent study was based upon the population of five sixth-grade classrooms drawn from middle-class neighborhoods of Seattle. In the initial testing only those pupils who were absent at one or the other of two group testing situations were excluded, in addition to those few who were known to have severe reading disabilities or foreign-language home backgrounds. Of this original group of 150 preadolescents, the 87 Ss listed in the telephone directory at the same home address 6 years later were asked to participate in the follow-up study. A letter explaining the study and copies of the questionnaires were mailed during the summer vacation period. An imbalance in the sex distribution of the original population was successively increased by a slight, but consistent tendency for girls to respond more than boys. Ss who returned incomplete questionnaires were discarded, and the final sample included 33 girls and 16 boys.

The biases in the sample are obvious: The research group is based upon volunteer Ss and excluded children from socially and geographically mobile families. While there is no reason to expect any systematic bias in the results related to these factors, several steps were taken to detect and evaluate possible bias. The research sample was found to be comparable to the group lost on the follow-up in their initial (preadolescent) scores on social-personal orientation and self-esteem. To control for effects of possible interaction of sex differences and volunteer bias, separate analyses of sex differences on the major research variables were made for (a) the total sample of boys versus girls and (b) a subsample including the group of boys versus a special sample of girls matched with the boys on their initial (preadolescent) scores. Since the results of analyses based on the subsample were entirely comparable to results obtained on the total sample, no evidence of bias based upon interaction of sex and volunteering was observed. Therefore, only the data based upon the total sample of 49 are reported here.

Measures

Parallel forms of a self-descriptive questionnaire were given to provide self and ideal-self descriptions at the preadolescent and adolescent

levels.¹ The basic instrument was designed to control several response sets: Elevation and dispersion sets were controlled by using a multiple-choice, forced-choice format; a favorability set was controlled by equating the social desirability of response alternatives; and response in terms of sex-role stereotypes was minimized by eliminating obviously sex-typed content. Half of the self-descriptive statements were designed to reflect orientation to social experiences, and half of the items were concerned with individual characteristics having no direct implication of concern with social experiences. Judges' ratings were used to determine the social desirability of items and in coding social versus personal orientation on both the pre-adolescent and adolescent forms.

There were 95 items in the preadolescent form and 105 items in the adolescent form of the questionnaire. Approximately half of the content was replicated; on the follow-up form items were dropped which referred specifically to the life situation of the younger child, and new items were added to reflect more fully the increased complexity of interests and social experiences of the adolescent. The self-descriptive sentences of the questionnaire were arranged into clusters of five items each, and Ss chose one "most" and one "least" characteristic item from each cluster. Items within clusters were approximately equal in social desirability but varied in terms of social-personal orientation, as shown in the following sample clusters from the preadolescent form:

I like to play in team games against other schools. (S)²
 I can usually get kids to stop arguing and make up. (S)
 I'd rather figure things out for myself before asking for help. (P)
 I'm practically never sick. (P)
 My friends spend a lot of time at my house. (S)

and from the adolescent form of the questionnaire:

I usually get along very well with my teachers. (S)
 My friends spend a lot of time at my house. (S)
 I prefer difficult tasks to easy ones. (P)
 People think I have a good sense of humor. (S)
 I enjoy many different kinds of recreation. (P)

Two measures were derived from the basic questionnaire: (1) social-personal orientation scores were derived from the content of the self-descriptions. S was classified as "socially oriented" if his choices of social items

¹ The preadolescent and adolescent forms of the self-descriptive questionnaire have been deposited with the American Documentation Institute, Auxiliary Publications Project, Photoduplication Service, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540. Order Document No. 8280, remitting in advance \$1.25 for 35-mm. microfilm or for 6 × 8 photocopies.

² Letters in parentheses illustrate scoring of the social-personal orientation measure described below.

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exceeded the number of personal items chosen; S was classified as personally oriented if personal items equaled or exceeded social items in his self-description. (2) Self-esteem scores were based upon the congruence between self and ideal-self descriptions. S's score consisted of the number of agreements minus the number of contradictions. The possible range of self-esteem scores extended from -38 to +38 (preadolescent) and from -42 to +42 (adolescent). Actual ranges of self-esteem scores were from -2 to +26 and from -3 to +39 respectively. Stability of self-esteem was measured by classifying as "unstable" the one-third of the group who had shifted 10 points or more on the follow-up testing.

The second instrument used in the follow-up study consisted of a modified form Kelly's Role Construct Repertory Test (RCRT) (Kelly, 1955) adapted for mail administration. Ss nominated individuals for nine roles (self, mother, father, same-sexed friend, opposite-sexed friend, respected person, pitied person, rejecting person, disliked person). Twelve triads were selected for comparison, and personal constructs were obtained from each of the 12 comparisons. Responses to the RCRT provided three measures: (1) Interpersonal scores were coded from references to relationships between persons or to qualities which imply an interpersonal orientation ("friendly and thoughtful," "push others around"). (2) Egocentric perception of others was inferred from the presence of either derogatory statements ("selfish, narrow-minded, insane," "both are cheapskates"), or personal references ("I feel inferior to both of them"; "both used to be my boy friends"). (3) Self-disclosure was scored in instances in which S disregarded instructions to remove a slip of paper on which he had written his own name and those of other nominees, thus violating the request for anonymity.

In testing major hypotheses, frequency comparisons of Ss scoring above and below the medians on the several research variables were evaluated with χ^2 tests. Since the hypotheses involved directional predictions, one-tailed tests were used.

RESULTS

Developmental sex differences in social-personal orientation, predicted by the hypothesis 1, were clearly supported. Where there were no sex differences at the preadolescent level, 6 years later the girls were significantly more socially oriented than the boys ($\chi^2 = 6.24$, $p < .02$). However, directional changes within each sex group were also predicted. The proportions of boys (44 per cent) and girls (46 per cent) showing a change on this measure were equivalent, but the shifts occurred in opposite directions, as predicted. Where 9 girls were socially oriented and 24 personally oriented at preadolescence, 18 were socially oriented and 14 personally oriented 6 years later ($\chi^2 = 4.26$, $p < .05$). The increase in

personal orientation among boys (from 7 socially oriented and 9 personally oriented in preadolescence to 2 socially oriented and 14 personally oriented in adolescence) fell just short of statistical significance (binomial test, $p < .07$).

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. There were no sex differences in either the level or the stability of self-esteem; median self-esteem scores for boys and girls were identical at both preadolescent and adolescent levels.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that social orientation at the preadolescent level would foreshadow a drop in self-esteem 6 years later. This was confirmed for girls ($\chi^2 = 4.41$, $p < .05$), but no trends were evident in the boys' data. The corollary that adolescent social orientation would not be related to devalued self-esteem in girls was also supported; with only two socially oriented boys, no test could be made on the male group.

Hypothesis 4—that socially oriented adolescents would use more interpersonal constructs—was not supported. The results showed a mean difference in the predicted direction, but fell considerably short of a reliable difference.

Adolescents low in self-esteem more often indicated egocentric perception of others on the RCRT ($\chi^2 = 4.77$, $p < .05$), confirming Hypothesis 5. The final prediction—that low self-esteem subjects would more often disclose their identities on an anonymous questionnaire—was confirmed for girls ($zU = 2.73$, $p < .004$), but this relationship did not hold up among boys.

DISCUSSION

While these findings, based upon preliminary measures and a restricted sample, do not allow broad generalizations, they would seem to have important implications for research on the basic problem. Based on a longitudinal study, the findings captured something of the process of change in the self-image which goes with adolescent development and add support to generalizations that have previously rested upon cross-sectional data. Self-esteem and social-personal orientation emerge as independent dimensions of the self-image which enter into different kinds of functional relationships with other aspects of personality.

Despite the differences in method, the present findings with regard to self-esteem are consistent with Engel's earlier data, suggesting that self-esteem is a relatively stable dimension of the self, and one which is independent of sex role. Social-personal orientation, on the other hand, appears to mirror the divergent processes of masculine and feminine character development among adolescents in our culture. The results also offer further warnings that the meaning of a personality dimension is dependent upon the developmental level of the individual and that sex differences must be

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considered in conceptualizing the development and dynamics of the self-image.

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