

## Developmental Change and Stability in Adolescent Self-Concept

By: Ritch C. Savin-Williams and [David H. Demo](#)

Savin-Williams, Ritch C., and David H. Demo. (1984). Developmental change and stability in adolescent self-concept. *Developmental Psychology*, 20, 1100-1110. DOI: [10.1037/0012-1649.20.6.1100](https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.20.6.1100)

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### **Abstract:**

This research challenges the traditional conception of adolescence as a time of stress and instability in self-concept. Using multiple measures of self-concept with a longitudinal sample, three components of self-concept are distinguished: the experienced self, the presented self, and self-feelings. Feelings about the self are relatively stable from moment to moment and from year to year. There are apparently three routes through the adolescent years: stable, baseline, and oscillating. For most study participants, level of self-esteem increased gradually and only slightly from 7th to 10th grade. This study is unique because of its methodology (longitudinal and multiple measures) and its counter-traditional characterization of adolescence.

### **Article:**

During early adolescence an individual must confront tumultuous intra-psychic energies and a demanding social world, both of which cause dramatic alterations in the self-concept. Self-esteem reaches an all-time low, fluctuating from one moment to another during these stressful years. This characterization is the classical portrait subscribed to by many clinicians and parents, buttressed in large part by early theorists of adolescent development (e.g., Blos, 1962; Freud, 1948, 1958; Hall, 1904). This view of adolescence has been extended to include our behavioral and genetic kin, the nonhuman primates. For example, Goodall (1971) portrays chimpanzee adolescence as "a difficult and frustrating time for some chimpanzees just as it is for some humans" (p. 173). Among langur monkeys adolescence is a time of "stress and tension" and is likely, for the male, "to be one of the most dangerous and traumatic stages of his life" (Dolhinow, 1972, p. 383).

Recent empirical research on self-concept development has resulted in a readjustment of this view of the adolescent self-image (Coleman, 1977). Most persistent in correcting the traditional clinical assessment has been Offer (Offer, 1969; Offer & Offer 1975; Offer, Ostrov, & Howard 1981):

The most dramatic of the OSIQ (Offer Self-Image Questionnaire) findings are those that permit us to characterize the model American teenager as feeling confident, happy, and self-satisfied—a portrait of the American adolescent that contrasts sharply with that drawn by many theorists of adolescent development, who contend that adolescence is pervaded with turmoil, dramatic mood swings, and rebellion. (Offer et al., 1981; pp. 83-84)

In a recent 3-year, cross-sectional and longitudinal study of self-concept between the ages of 11 and 18 years, Dusek and Flaherty (1981) confirmed the findings of Offer. Using a 21-pair adjective semantic differential scale (e.g., satisfied–dissatisfied) to assess multiple aspects of the self-concept, adolescents were asked to assess their "characteristic self" by placing a check along a 7-point scale. Dusek and Flaherty found that (a) adolescent self-concept does not develop in a discontinuous manner (significant self-concept factor stability during the 8 years) and (b) that no significant change in level of self-concept occurred over time. The changes that did occur evolved slowly, as the individual developed in other aspects of his or her life. They concluded that adolescence is not necessarily a time of great upheaval in the self-concept and that the person who enters adolescence is basically the same person who exits it.

Another longitudinal research project is the 8-year Youth in Transition study of change and stability during the adolescent and young adult years. In regard to self-esteem, Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston (1978) found the following developmental patterns: (a) a fairly high level of self-evaluation at age 15 with scores rising gradually over the next 8 years; (b) a lack of sudden and substantial changes in self-regard; and (c) stability of scores from one year to the next. Thus, self-esteem appeared to be a relatively stable dimension of personality. The changes in self-esteem that occurred, usually during late adolescence, were gradual rather than revolutionary.

As a result of these findings, a new conceptualization of adolescent development has emerged that is consistent with a perspective of life-course stability. Perhaps adolescence is not a time of storm and stress, identity crisis, or universal disruption of self-concept. If an adolescent experiences turmoil and low self-concept, then these may indeed be characteristic of his or her entire life course and represent no more than 10% to 20% of the adolescent population (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Hill, 1980; Offer & Offer, 1975).

Wylie (1979) has extensively reviewed the empirical literature on self-concept and reached the same general conclusion:

no clear evidence of any association (within the age range from 6 to 50) between chronological age and scores on any of the well-known verbal self-regard scales, when other relevant variables are properly controlled (p. 26).

On the other hand, Rosenberg (1979) maintains that early adolescence is a time of self-consciousness regarding what others think about the self, and is thus a time of self-concept disturbance. Reviewing his empirical findings on the self-concept, Rosenberg found that global self-esteem declines during the adolescent years, until late adolescence when one's level of self-esteem improves.

Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, and Bush (1979), collaborators with Rosenberg, have focused on the dramatic decline of self-esteem among girls who move from a K-6 elementary school to a junior high school for the seventh grade. But an examination of their data also reveals that the self-esteem of girls who went to K-8 schools and that of all the boys in the study slightly increased from sixth to seventh grade.

Wylie's (1979) summary thus appears justified: "the burden of proof is on the person who wishes to say that any kind of Rosenberg scores vary as a function of age (p. 24)." A similar conclusion was reached after reviewing studies that employed the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, other commonly used measures, and most idiosyncratic verbal report self-esteem instruments.

The present study is unique in self-esteem research in that multiple measures of self-esteem are employed using longitudinal data to test the stability of self-concept during adolescence. This report is based on a 6-year study of the ecology of self-esteem during adolescence. Previous articles have (a) distinguished two dimensions of the self-esteem construct: the presented and experienced self (Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981; Demo, in press); (b) noted biological and ecological factors in the expression of self-esteem (Jaquish & Savin-Williams, 1981); and (c) explored the situational and transsituational determinants of self-feelings (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983). Those reports, however, were based on data from one year only, and thus were not developmental in scope. The purpose of the present report is to test the stability of components of the self during the early and middle adolescent years. Two questions are addressed: (a) Is there stability or instability in self-evaluation during adolescence, from one moment to the next and from one year to the next; and (b) is there a time of crisis or low self-concept during the adolescent years.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The identity and number of adolescents vary according to the year (see Table 1) and the measure considered (see Table 2) In 1977 an original sample of adolescents (20 males and 21 females) was randomly drawn from a list of all seventh grade students at a local junior high school. These adolescents represented all social classes and all major religious Identities. Although primarily Caucasian, the sample also included three minority group members.

Table 2 presents the number of adolescents who participated in each measure for each year. The attrition was due to both natural causes (e.g., moving away) and to the research design: due to human subjects considerations each year every adolescent chose the measures that he or she wanted to complete. As a result, the study experienced a fluctuating sample size. Five new participants were added in the 8th grade and 20 in the 9th grade. Of the original 41 adolescents 31 continued to participate in some aspect of the study through the 10th grade. Although the 25 new adolescents were matched

**Table 1**  
*Physical and Socio-Demographic Data by Grade in School*

Variable	Seventh (N = 41)	Eighth (N = 39)	Ninth (N = 53)	Tenth (N = 39)
Mean age (years)	12.3	13.3	14.2	15.2
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	20	17	23	15
Female	21	22	30	24
<b>Maturation</b>				
Pubic hair stage	2.3	3.0	3.8	4.5
Genital/breast stage	2.2	3.4	4.1	4.7
<b>Religion</b>				
Protestant	24	20	27	20
Catholic	7	9	12	4
Jewish	2	2	3	2
None	8	8	11	13
<b>Hollingshead Social Class Index</b>				
1 & 2	14	13	17	12
3, 4, & 5	19	17	24	18
6, 7 & 8	8	9	12	9

on socio-demographic variables, their self-esteem level was not a determinant of their inclusion.

### *Measures and Procedures*

Based on the conceptual model of Mead (1934), two dimensions of the self-concept have been distinguished, the presented and the experienced self (Demo, in press; Savin-Williams & Jaqtush, 1981). In addition, we have proposed a third dimension of the evaluative self, self-feelings (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983).

**Presented self** Although this dimension was proposed nearly half a century ago and has received some theoretical attention (Goffman, 1956; Rosenberg, 1979), a recent review of the literature (Wells & Marwell, 1976) indicates that the construct has not been empirically demonstrated. The presented self is that dimension that an individual verbally and nonverbally reveals to the social world. This aspect of the self is highly variable because individuals portray themselves differently to various others as a function of role demands and situational changes. Measurement relies on others making behavioral or personality assessments. Three measures of the presented self are employed in this study to assess what others judge the self-concept of an individual to be.

1. Behavioral observations. A behavior checklist was constructed by Savin-Williams (Savin-Williams & Jaqtush, 1981), consisting of 20 behavioral descriptions, Ten items measure high self-esteem (e.g., faces others when speaking, expresses opinions), and 10 behaviors measure low self-esteem (e.g., glances around to monitor others, gives excuses for failure). Interobserver reliabilities of the 20 behaviors are given in the Appendix; the validity of the measure (Demo, in press) is documented elsewhere.

The behavior checklists were completed by "youth companions," college undergraduate students who met weekly for one semester with their same-sex adolescent. Each year of the study the adolescents (with a few exceptions) were teamed with a different participant observer (or youth companion). The pair spent several hours together each week, engaged in whatever activities they chose, such as eating pizza, playing athletics, going shopping, and talking about their lives. After each occasion together the observer completed a behavior checklist.

Each checklist produced a self-esteem score by subtracting the number of low-self-esteem behaviors from the number of high-self-esteem behaviors, and then dividing by 10. The resultant proportion scores (range = —1.00 to +1.00) for the checklists were summed, The mean of these scores provided the behavioral self-esteem level for that individual.

2. Peer ratings. Each adolescent in the project rated all other peers in the study on a number of traits (e.g., athletic ability, friendship), including self-esteem. In individual sessions a college-age interviewer read the list of names in random order to each rater and asked the rater to select a number from one (low self-esteem) to five (high self-esteem) that reflected his or her opinion of the ratee's self-esteem. A peer-based self-esteem score was obtained for each participant by computing the mean of all ratings given to that individual by other youths in the study

3. Q-Sort. Each youth companion assessed the personality characteristics of his or her adolescent using the 100 card Q-Sort (Block, 1961) at the conclusion of the semester spent together. This sorting was then correlated with a template for a prototypical ideal self-esteem adolescent. This template was formed by three self-esteem researchers (Savin-Williams, Demo, Jaquish) with inter-judge reliability of .78, .69, and .71.

**Experienced self** This dimension has a longer research tradition than does the presented self and represents the self as evaluated by the individual. Inward feelings of approval or disapproval, self-respect or self-doubt, liking or not liking oneself are privately experienced by all human beings, and these feelings may or may not correspond to those communicated to others in social inter- action (defined here as the presented self). The experienced self, or "me" (Mead, 1934), is the basis for the vast majority of research on the self-concept (Wells & Marwell, 1976), It was assessed in this study using two traditional self-report measures.

Table 2  
Number of Adolescents Who Completed Each Measure for Each Grade

Year	Observation				Beeper				Peers				RSE				SEI				Q-Sort			
	7th	8th	9th	10th	7th	8th	9th	10th	7th	8th	9th	10th	7th	8th	9th	10th	7th	8th	9th	10th	7th	8th	9th	10th
Seventh	40	34	21	16	37	28	28	15	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Eighth	—	39	25	19	—	35	30	16	—	35	33	23	—	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Ninth	—	—	43	24	—	—	51	28	—	—	54	37	—	—	41	29	—	—	41	29	—	—	34	15
Tenth	—	—	—	29	—	—	—	29	—	—	—	35	—	—	—	35	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	24

Note For example, of the 40 adolescents who were observed in the 7th grade, 34 were observed in the 8th grade, 21 in the 9th grade, and 16 in the 10th grade. Similarly, of the 43 adolescents who were observed in the 9th grade, 24 were observed in the 10th grade. Of the 43, 21 were from the original 7th grade sample, 4 (25-21) were new 8th graders, and 18 (43-25) were new 9th graders. Measures are behavioral observations, beeper, peer ratings, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory, and Block Q-sort

\* Measure not given that year

1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) The RSE (Rosenberg, 1979) is a 10-item, Likert-format scale consisting of sentences such as, "I take a positive attitude toward myself" Respondents indicate the degree (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to which each statement reflects their own self-attitudes. It was administered in individual sessions during each spring semester.

2 Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI). The SEI (Coopersmith, 1967) consists of 54 items (e.g., "I'm easy to like"), to which individuals indicate whether it is "like me" or "not like me" It too was given during individual sessions in the spring.

**Self-feelings** This dimension refers to a series of more diverse, more highly differentiated feelings about oneself, independent of self-esteem. Whether or not a person has self-respect and likes oneself, he or she may feel powerful, confident, and in control, or frustrated, weak, and manipulated. In order to assess these feelings among adolescents, a new, innovative self-report, repeated response measure was developed. This method is a modification of a technique developed by Csikzentmihalyi and his colleagues at the University of Chicago (Csikzentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977; Larson & Csikzentmihalyi, 1978). This earlier work focused on adolescent mood states, sense of control, and activities. Our objective is to assess an individual's self-feelings in naturalistic settings, removing respondents from experimental, laboratory situations (Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981).

For one week per year each of the adolescents carried a beeper, a paging device frequently used by physicians and others who depend on remote contact. On a random schedule during pre- and post-school times (7 a.m. to 8 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.) the paging device "beeped" three to four times daily. Since the school would not allow the devices to be carried on the premises, during school hours the participants responded (as if their beeper had sounded) at four previously determined times (which varied for each adolescent). On weekends and days off from school a different schedule was followed—six to eight random beeps between the hours of 10 a.m. and 10 p.m.

At such times the adolescent indicated on a pre-printed beep sheet the physical location, major activity, thoughts, others present, and perception of time passing (see Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981). There are 40 words (20 positive and 20 negative words) on the backside of the sheet. The adolescent circled as many words (average of 3 to 5 words) as he or she felt about the self when beeped. A self-feeling score was derived for each occasion by subtracting the number of negative self-feeling words (e.g., insecure, sluggish, unloved) from the number of positive self-feeling words (e.g., happy, free, loved), then dividing this quantity by the total number of words selected (possible range =  $-1.00$  to  $+1.00$ ). A participant's self-feeling score was the mean of these scores computed across all settings. The adolescents responded to the beep signal at an average rate of 81%.

## RESULTS

### *Intercorrelations Among Measures*

Correlations presented in Table 3 indicate that for the years providing the most information on the self (grades 9 and 10), stronger

**Table 3**  
**Correlations Among Six Measures of Self-Esteem, 7th Grade through 10th Grade**

Measure	OBS 7	OBS 8	OBS 9	OBS 10	BEEP 7	BEEP 8	BEEP 9	BEEP 10	PEER 8	PEER 9	PEER 10
OBS 7	—										
OBS 8	.15	—									
OBS 9	.35	.31	—								
OBS 10	.14	.40*	.43*	—							
BEEP 7	.17	.13	.48**	.39	—						
BEEP 8	.13	.02	-.15	-.29	.55***	—					
BEEP 9	.20	.02	-.25	-.13	.36*	.39*	—				
BEEP 10	.51*	.12	-.04	-.19	.48*	.36	.81***	—			
PEER 8	.28	.21	-.05	.03	-.04	-.14	.14	.47*	—		
PEER 9	.34*	.26	.39**	.10	.01	.01	.12	.18	.26	—	
PEER 10	.33	.42*	.40*	.10	.01	.01	.05	.19	.71***	.87***	—
Q-SORT 9	.26	.33	.61***	.52*	.25	-.02	-.28	.03	.36	.38*	.30
Q-SORT 10	.62*	.30	.36	.54**	.58*	-.02	.23	.35	.16	.42*	.42*
RSE 9	.35	.33	.15	.36	-.02	-.19	.20	.23	.07	.32*	.31*
RSE 10	.44*	.34	.14	.11	.31	.29	.30*	.37*	.37	.33*	.43**
SEI 9	.42*	.14	.18	.04	.16	.21	.44**	.43*	.19	.41**	.33*
SEI 10	.51*	.18	.26	.13	.10	.21	.34*	.47**	.51**	.46**	.56***
		Q-SORT 9	Q-SORT 10	RSE 9	RSE 10	SEI 9	SEI 10				
Q-SORT 9		—									
Q-SORT 10		.44*	—								
RSE 9		.18	.46*	—							
RSE 10		.09	.45*	.59***	—						
SEI 9		.33*	.43*	.55***	.28	—					
SEI 10		.42*	.63***	.46**	.65***	.66***	—				

*Note* Correlations are based on different *N*s (pair-wise deletions) as result of procedures explained in the text, so correlations based on larger *N*s are more likely to be significant. Measures are behavioral observations, beepers, peer ratings, Block Q-Sort, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

intercorrelations were obtained among measures of the same dimension (e.g., OBS 9-PEER 9, .39,  $p < .01$ ) than among measures of different dimensions (e.g., OBS 9-COOP 9, .18, ns). This "clustering" is consistent with our interpretation of separate self-components documented in more detail in earlier reports (Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981; Demo, in press), and it enables us to consider each measure as an independent indicator of the respective dimensions.

More specifically, examination of the correlations for each year (see Table 3) reveals that, with only two exceptions,<sup>1</sup> each intercorrelation between measures of the same dimension is significant (average intercorrelation = .43). Weaker but still significant intercorrelations obtain across the presented and experienced dimensions (7 of the 12 correlations are significant, average intercorrelation = .32), and three of the four correlations between the self-feelings measure and the experienced self measures are significant (average intercorrelation = .37). The six correlations between the self-feelings measure and the presented self measures, however, indicate no convergence (three of the four correlations are negative, and the average correlation is — 0.01).

### *Analysis 1: Stability of Moment-to-Moment Self-Feelings*

The beeper data were selected for this analysis because they provide repeated measures of self-feelings over a relatively brief period of time (1 week). Using the TROLL Package Program<sup>2</sup> on the beeper data during the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grade years, each individual's self-feeling score for each beep instance was regressed on his or her immediately prior self-feeling score in order to answer the question: Are adolescents characterized by stable or unstable feelings about the self? Generalized least squares estimates were computed for each individual for each year according to the autoregressive equation:  $X_T = B_{xT-1} + e$ , that is, self-feelings at one point in time are a

<sup>1</sup> The two exceptions to this pattern are ORS 8-PEER 8(.21) and oas 10-PEER 10(.10); the remaining seven intercorrelations within the presented and experienced dimensions are significant.

<sup>2</sup> The TROLL Package Program is described in the TROLL User's Guide (chap. 7), available from the Center for Computational Research in Economics and Management Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

function of self-feelings at an earlier time, plus error. T tests assessed the extent to which each regression coefficient was significantly different from zero.

The adolescents were categorized into three groups based on their beeper responses. The "stable" group consists of individuals whose regression coefficients were statistically significant, that is, one moment was highly predictive of the self-feelings score at the next moment beeped. The "baseline" group contains individuals who had beta coefficients that were not significantly different from zero. Finally, the "oscillating" group includes individuals whose beta coefficients were significantly negative in directionality. Thus, instability was typical of individuals in this latter group because self-feelings scores fluctuated in opposite directions from one beep instance to the next.

In Table 4 the number and percentage of individuals in each of the three categories for each year is presented. For each year, the majority of adolescents were classified as baseline. This indicates that their self-feelings scores fell within a nonsignificant range of their baseline level (neither significantly similar to nor significantly different from their overall mean self-feeling score). The second most frequent pattern for each year was stable. The percentage of adolescents classified as stable increased from 7th to 10th grade. The exception was in the 9th grade, despite the fact that the individuals added during this year were overrepresentative of the stable group (see below). Apparently, the most unstable year for self-feelings is the 9th grade. Finally, the frequency of individuals in the oscillating category fluctuated from year to year but never exceeded the percentage of adolescents in either of the other two categories.

**Table 4**  
*Number and Percentage of Individuals in Each Self-Feeling Group for Each Year*

Grade	Stable		Baseline		Oscillating		N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
7th	3	11	22	82	2	7	27*
8th	9	26	24	69	2	6	35
9th	9	18	33	66	8	16	50*
10th	12	41	16	56	1	3	29

\* The Ns are lower than Table 2 because 10 youths in the 7th grade and 1 youth in the 10th grade had too few beeper responses to run the TROLL analysis on their data.

### *Analysts 2: Year-to-Year Stability of Self-Components*

**Self-feelings.** The data indicate that in most instances the adolescents remained in the same self-feeling group from one year to the next. This was most clearly the case from 7th to 8th grade (65% of those with beeper scores in both years) and from 9th to 10th grade (66%). Slightly over one half (52%) of the 8th grade adolescents changed groups by the time the 9th-grade data were collected.

Stability of self-feelings is further documented in the year-to-year correlations for the beeper data (see Table 5). All correlations indicate that self-feelings is a stable component of the self among our adolescents, especially from one year to the next.

**Presented self.** Correlations among the behavioral observation scores from one year to another (see Table 3) may be interpreted as "stability coefficients." The data indicate little stability in presented self-esteem from 7th to 8th grade, moderate stability from 8th to 9th grade, and significant stability from the 8th and 9th grades to the 10th grade.

The peer ratings indicate stability from 8th to 10th grade. Although there is only a moderate correlation between 8th- and 9th-grade peer ratings, correlations between 8th and 10th-grade ratings (.71) and between 9th and



**Table 5**  
*Self-Feelings Score Correlations, Ns, and Significance Levels for 4 Years*

Grade	7th	8th	9th	10th
7th	—	.55 <i>p</i> = .001	.36 <i>p</i> = .03	.48 <i>p</i> = .04
8th	<i>N</i> = 28	—	.39 <i>p</i> = .02	.36 <i>p</i> = .08
9th	<i>N</i> = 28	<i>N</i> = 30	—	.81 <i>p</i> = .000
10th	<i>N</i> = 15	<i>N</i> = 16	<i>N</i> = 28	—

10th grade ratings (.87) are significant at the .001 level.

The Q-Sort measure was employed only in the 9th and 10th grades. Q-Sort scores for the 2 years correlated significantly, presenting further evidence of stability of presented self-esteem during adolescence.

**Experienced self.** The correlation between the ninth and tenth grade RSE scores was .59 ( $p < .001$ ). SEI scores corroborate the RSE patterns in experienced self-esteem. The correlation of .66 ( $p < .001$ ) between SEI scores for the 9th and 10th grades points to stability in self-esteem in our adolescent sample.

**Summary.** Stability coefficients present a consistent picture on all measures of the three dimensions of the self for our sample: Feelings about the self, the presented self, and the experienced self are all stable components of the self-concept during the adolescent years. That is, our data support the notion of stability of individual differences in the self-concept (adolescents ranked essentially the same from one year to the next). These analyses do not, however, address the issue of constancy and change in the level of the self-concept from one year to the next for the sample as a whole. We next turn to an exploration of this issue.

### *Analysis 3: Constancy and Change in Mean Level of Self-Components*

**Self-feelings.** For the group as a whole, self-feeling scores decreased from the 7th ( $M = .23$ ) to 8th ( $M = .13$ ) to 9th ( $M = .10$ ) grades and then increased slightly to 10th grade ( $M = .16$ ). There were no significant differences among these grade means (Duncan's Multiple Range Test for Variable Beep, alpha level = .05,  $df = 148$ ,  $MS = 1002.1$ ) or for the model as a whole ( $F = 1.27$ ,  $p < .29$ ). Thus, there was essential constancy in the adolescents' feelings about the self from one year to the next.

**Presented self.** The observation-based behavioral checklist indicates a steady increase in presented self-esteem from 7th grade through 10th grade (see Table 6), with the most dramatic gain occurring between 8th and 9th grade. Employing a .05 alpha level, scores in the 9th and 10th grades were significantly higher than they were in the 7th grade, and the 10th grade levels were significantly higher than those in the 8th grade. These correlations may be interpreted as "growth" in presented self-esteem.

On the other hand, peer-rating scores indicate stability (little change in mean level) from 8th to 10th grade, producing a mean score of 3.4 for all three years (see Table 6). The Q-Sort scores were more similar to the behavior observations, revealing a significant growth in presented self-esteem between the 9th and 10th grades.

**Experienced self.** RSE scores reveal a modest growth in experienced self-esteem

Table 6  
*Mean Self-Esteem Levels by Five Measures,  
 7th Grade through 10th Grade*

Measure	7th	8th	9th	10th
Presented self				
Behavioral observation	.31 <sup>a</sup> (40)	.36 <sup>a</sup> (39)	.42 <sup>a</sup> (43)	.45 <sup>a</sup> (29)
Peer rating		3.44 (39)	3.43 (54)	3.45 (38)
Q-sort			.32 (34)	.52 <sup>b</sup> (24)
Experienced self				
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale			3.07 (41)	3.44 (32)
Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory			31.83 (41)	31.86 (35)

<sup>a</sup> OBS means for any two consecutive years are not significantly different at the .05 level, but any means two or more years apart are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

<sup>b</sup> Q-sort mean for 10th grade is significantly higher than mean for previous year.

from 9th to 10th grade. There was virtually no change in mean level of SEI self-esteem scores from 9th to 10th grade.

**Summary.** Although there was a gradual decrease in self-feeling scores until the 10th grade, there was a modest increase in presented and experienced self-esteem during the same period. All components indicate an increase in mean self-evaluation levels from the 9th to the 10th grades.

### *Longitudinal Attrition*

Because of the substantial attrition of participants over time and from one measure to another, all longitudinal correlations are year-to-year pairwise deletions. Thus, the correlations are truly longitudinal, excluding those adolescents who did not participate during two consecutive years. In the sections below we compare for each measure those who dropped from the project with those who were added.

**Self-feelings.** The 24 adolescents who decided not to continue responding to the beeper had the same self-feeling level as did those who were added to the project (+.107 and +.108, respectively). In regard to self-feeling stability, however, there was a stronger tendency for those who dropped out than among those added to be "oscillators" (nine and three individuals, respectively) and not to be in the stable group (two and nine individuals, respectively). This difference has the effect of creating a portrait of an increasingly stable adolescence with age, because seven of the nine stable individuals were added in the 9th grade.

**Presented self** The peer-rating scores were nearly identical for those who dropped from (3.41) and those who were added to (3.38) the project. Comparing the behavioral observation scores of the same two groups (drop-outs = .33; add ons = .36) also revealed no significant difference,  $t(22) = .40$ , ns. Only on the Q-Sort measure did the scores of the two groups differ significantly,  $t(26) = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ , with the dropouts scoring lower (.21 and .46, respectively).

**Experienced self** On both the Rosenberg and the Coopersmith the self-esteem scores of the dropouts were not significantly different than the scores of the add ons,  $t(17) = 1.06$ , ns;  $t(16) = 1.21$ , ns. On both measures, however, the scores were lower for the dropouts (RSE: 2.6 and 3.8; SEI: 30.2 and 33.3).

**Summary.** On five of the six measures there were no significant differences between adolescents who elected to drop from the project and adolescents who were randomly added to the study. On four of the six measures,

however, those who dropped out had somewhat lower self scores than did the add ons. In addition, those who dropped out would appear to be less stable individuals.

## DISCUSSION

We believe that we have raised a serious objection to the traditional, clinical view of adolescence as a time of crisis and instability. We are not the first. Others (Bachman et al., 1978; Coleman, 1977; Dusek & Flaherty, 1981; Hill, 1980; Offer, 1969) have raised the same objection. Coleman (1977) attributes the discrepancy between the classical, clinical view and the empirical research to (a) selected populations studied (especially the clinician's contact with "abnormal" populations); (b) the mass media focus on sensational adolescent behavior (e.g., delinquency, drugs); and (c) the tendency of empiricists to overestimate the degree to which adolescents can or are willing to reveal their innermost feelings. Our sample size, although small, was random and quite diverse. The small size was not ideal for statistical purposes but it did allow for an in-depth, extensive array of empirical data. For example, we employed not one but six measures of the self, including paper-and-pencil questionnaires, naturalistic observation of behavior, a time-sampling technique, and peer review. Some asked for self-revelations; others did not. Despite the diversity of instruments, they all pointed to the same conclusion: The self is characterized by stability during the supposedly "turbulent" years of adolescence. This is true for self-feelings, the presented self, and the experienced self.

We are referring, of course, to the vast majority of our adolescent sample. But we also discovered a small group of youth who apparently have widely fluctuating self-feelings, reminiscent of the psychiatrist's client. Unfortunately, our sample of oscillating youth is too small to predict whether there is stability in this instability, that is, that the same individuals are oscillators throughout their adolescent years. We speculate that these youth experienced a "traumatic" childhood and will be traumatized as adults. We are currently in the process of interviewing these adolescents as post-high school youth. The longitudinal nature of our research is too infrequent in the self literature, and yet we know of no better approach to address the issue of change and constancy in the self-concept.

If there is change in self-evaluation level during adolescence, it would appear to be gradual and slight. We can find no evidence that adolescence is a time of a downward turn in self-esteem. This conclusion is in basic agreement with Wylie's (1979) assessment of the empirical literature on self-esteem. Although our finding of a gradual increase in experienced and presented self-esteem during the adolescent years may be attributed to our attrition rate, it does confirm our earlier study (Demo & Savin-Williams, 1983) conducted with a far larger and more diverse sample and employing a quite different methodology. Thus, adolescence is a time of stable or gradual growth in self-esteem levels and of stability in self-feelings from one moment to the next, and from one year to the next.

We are uncertain, however, as to why there is a slight surge in self-evaluation during the 9th to 10th grade transition. This is the year when the adolescents moved from junior high to high school, supposedly a difficult environmental transition and role change. But this transition is unlike that experienced by 7th graders studied by Simmons et al. (1979). As Rosenberg (1979) has demonstrated, the move from elementary to junior high school is disturbing to self-conception because new friends must be made, a variety of teachers and their expectations must be accommodated, and new intellectual changes (such as foreign languages) must be confronted. All these adjustments coincide with or follow shortly after the onset of pubescence, resulting in the difficult years at ages 12 and 13 (Offer 1969; Rosenberg 1979). Through adolescence, however, the individual matures and becomes more independent, communicative, introspective, and perceptive of others' expectations and evaluations, so that by 10th grade he or she is psychologically stronger, more stable, and better prepared for life transitions. Further, Montemayor and Eisen (1977) report that, in comparison to younger students, 10th and 12th graders have sharper and more vivid self-conceptions and are more likely to view themselves in terms of personal beliefs and characteristics. Their findings suggest a gradual process whereby adolescents' developing cognitive abilities permit greater self-awareness. Coupled with our findings of stability in self-conception and modest gains in self-evaluation, adolescence appears more to be a stage of development, in the true sense, than of disruption.

For theoretical reasons (see discussion in Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981, and Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983) we distinguished several components of the self. The diversity of our measures enabled us to note the varying contributions of the self-esteem components to the growth and stability of the self-concept. Although we cannot, on the basis of the data presented here, conclude that self-feelings, presented self-esteem, and experienced self-esteem are distinct "traits," we believe our data support a conceptualization of different but overlapping dimensions of self-conception. That is, each dimension represents one aspect of the self-evaluation process and, at the same time, each dimension has an effect on the others, for example, an individual judges that he or she has many fine qualities (experienced dimension) and thus feels proud, secure, and confident (a second dimension). We must qualify, however, that the presented self and self-feelings, as measured here, do not intercorrelate and hence their relationship is inconsistent with this conceptualization.

Furthermore these dimensions are not intended as an all-inclusive list and may have elements of other psychological phenomena embedded within them. The presented self has aspects of social competence; the experienced self includes social desirability; and self-feelings may reflect mood state. As a unitary concept, self-esteem may have little meaning because it tells one little concerning the dimension of the self that the researcher wishes to convey or to measure. Because the vast majority of "self-esteem" studies (Wells & Marwell, 1976) employ standardized paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Rosenberg, Coopersmith, Lerner), we know a lot about the correlates and predictors of the experienced/social desirability self but relatively little about other components of the self. As just one illustration, without valid and reliable measures of the presented self we cannot test Rosenberg's (1979, p. 46) assertion that this dimension is "much more variable and situation-bound than other self-concept components," nor can we assess any developmental changes that may characterize self-presentation.

We have empirically documented and labeled three possible styles through adolescence: stable, baseline, and oscillating. These are similar to the routes proposed by Offer and Offer (1975): continuous growth, surgent growth, and tumultuous growth. For most adolescents, self-esteem, in the three components measured here, is an enduring, stable quality of the personality. Growth is gradual with few cases of substantial alterations in self-esteem level across time. We believe these findings will not only alter our view of self-esteem during the adolescent years but will also cause us to reevaluate our traditional characterization of adolescence as a traumatic phase in the life course.

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Appendix

Table A1  
Behaviors Contained on the Behavior Checklist. Reliability Coefficients  
and Adolescents' Agreement With Study's Assumptions

Indicator	r	% <sup>a</sup>
Positive		
1. Gives others directives or commands	.71	83***
2. Voice quality is appropriate for situation	.59	90***
3. Expresses opinions	.59	95***
4. Sits with others during social activities	.64	95***
5. Works cooperatively in a group	.64	93***
6. Faces others when speaking or being spoken to	.66	100***
7. Maintains eye contact during conversation	.58	95***
8. Initiates friendly contact with others	.63	95***
9. Maintains comfortable space between self and others	.56	93***
10. Little hesitation in speech, speaks fluently	.63	93***
Negative		
1. Puts down others by teasing, name calling, or gossiping	.65	83***
2. Gestures are dramatic or out of context	.91	63*
3. Inappropriate touching or avoids physical contact	.94	100***
4. Gives excuses for failures	.88	83***
5. Glances around to monitor others	.62	85***
6. Brags excessively about achievements, skills, appearance	.90	60*
7. Verbally puts self down; self depreciation	.88	100***
8. Speaks too loudly, abruptly, or in a dogmatic tone	.81	70**
9. Does not express views or opinions, especially when asked	.85	93***
10. Assumes a submissive stance	.85	95***

<sup>a</sup> Savin-Williams & Jaquish (1981).

\*  $p < .15$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$  according to the binomial probability distribution with  $p$  set at .50.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .