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Reitz, Anne K.

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Self-esteem development and life events: A review and integrative process framework

Anne K. Reitz 

Department of Developmental Psychology,
Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Anne K. Reitz, Department of Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, Noord-Brabant, The Netherlands.
Email: A.K.Reitz@tilburguniversity.edu

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Abstract

Self-esteem is a pervasive individual characteristic with major consequences for people's lives. Recent research demonstrated normative change and substantial individual differences in change across the lifespan, which triggered great interest in the sources of self-esteem development. This article provides an overview of the present state of the field of self-esteem development. First, to gain a comprehensive picture, I reviewed findings of different change indicators: mean-level change, individual differences in change, rank-order stability, and state (fluctuations). Second, I reviewed theory and empirical evidence on self-esteem change in response to normative and non-normative life events in the domains school/work and social relationships. Third, I reviewed theory and empirical evidence on situational processes and psychological mechanisms of self-esteem development. I integrated theoretical approaches from lifespan, personality developmental, and social-personality psychology in a process-oriented framework of self-esteem development in response to life events. Finally, I discussed directions for theoretical and methodological advancements.

KEYWORDS

change processes, life events, lifespan development, personality, self-esteem

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Self-esteem, a person's evaluation of their worth as a person, is a fundamental psychological construct that has been of continued major interest to laypeople and researchers. Since the introduction of self-esteem to the scientific literature by William James in 1890, a staggering 45 thousand articles have now been published on self-esteem in 218 different fields (according to web of science). The great interest in self-esteem is not surprising considering that self-esteem seems to help people live a happy and healthy life. There is strong evidence showing that self-esteem has numerous positive consequences (for the most recent review, see Orth & Robins, 2022a; for a critical comment, see Krueger et al., 2022; for the response, see Orth & Robins, 2022b), including success in the domains of school and work (see Krauss & Orth, 2021) and relationships (see Harris & Orth, 2019), and better physical and mental health (see Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

Against the backdrop of these findings, there has been an increasing societal and scientific interest in questions of whether and how self-esteem can be promoted. A web of science search yielded a fast-growing number of publications on self-esteem development from 111 in 2000 to 295 in 2010 and to 895 in 2020. The increasing availability of large-scale longitudinal data sets and advanced statistical methodologies in the last one to two decades has significantly advanced the field of self-esteem development. This research has generally demonstrated that self-esteem changes systematically across the lifespan and that it is relatively stable but also changeable (for a meta-analysis, see Orth et al., 2018). The observed patterns of self-esteem change prompted many questions about its conditions and causes. Based on lifespan theory and other transactional perspectives (Baltes et al., 2006; Roberts & Wood, 2006; Sameroff, 2010), researchers have increasingly considered that environmental changes, especially life events, can trigger self-esteem change. Current research is concerned with determining the impact of life events on self-esteem development and grapples with the major unanswered question of what specific factors and mechanisms cause self-esteem change (Hutteman et al., 2015; Reitz et al., 2020; van Scheppingen et al., 2018).

This article provides an overview of the state of the field of self-esteem development with regard to three major questions and debates. First, is self-esteem changeable (and if yes, in what way and how much)? Empirical research on four different types of indicators of change will be reviewed to obtain a comprehensive picture of self-esteem development. Second, can life events impact self-esteem change? Theoretical and empirical work will be reviewed to examine whether normative and non-normative life events in the domains education/work and social relationships help explain the systematic self-esteem development change across the lifespan and individual differences in change trajectories. Third, which factors and processes explain self-esteem change? Theoretical and empirical work that illuminate short- and long-term processes will be reviewed. I review and integrate different theoretical approaches and evidence in an overarching process-oriented framework on self-esteem development during life events. This article ends with recommendations for future research and delineates opportunities for advancements.

1 | IS SELF-ESTEEM CHANGEABLE?

An enduring question is where self-esteem falls on the stability-changeability continuum. There are multiple ways to conceptualize self-esteem change: (1) normative change (age-related trajectories), (2) individual differences in change trajectories (deviations from the average trajectory), (3) rank-order stability (stability of individual differences), and (4) state fluctuations (the ups and downs within persons across moments, days, or weeks; see Robins et al., 2001). These change indicators provide insights into different aspects of the changeability of self-esteem. They differ in whether they describe change at population level (1 and 3) or at the individual level (2 and 4) and whether they describe long(er)- (1–3) or short-term change (4). In addition, they inform long-standing debates, including whether self-esteem shows within-person change across the lifespan (1 and 2) and whether self-esteem is a trait or a state (3 and 4; see Donnellan et al., 2011). I reviewed for these four change indices to obtain a comprehensive picture of the changeability of self-esteem.

1.1 | Normative lifespan trajectory of self-esteem (mean-level change)

Normative development of self-esteem, typically assessed by mean-level change, refers to systematic change in average levels in people of the same age group in a population or sample. Studies generally point to systematic self-esteem development across the lifespan that show an inverted u-shaped pattern: self-esteem levels increase in childhood, remain stable in early to middle adolescence, increase from late adolescence through adulthood, peak in middle adulthood, plateau until older adulthood, and decline abruptly in late life (for a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies, see Orth et al., 2018). Change is typically most pronounced in young adulthood. Effect sizes had the largest positive value for 19-20-year-olds and the most negative values for 90-94-year-olds. Whereas the increase from adolescence to young adulthood seems to be a robust finding, there are some mixed findings for childhood to adolescence (decline vs. stability; Trzesniewski et al., 2013) and old age (differences in the starting age and magnitude of decline; Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013; see Orth & Robins, 2014).

1.2 | Individual differences in self-esteem development

Individual differences in self-esteem development indicate the degree to which self-esteem change deviates from the normative trajectory. Studies identified unique patterns of self-esteem development across the entire lifespan, including adolescence (Birkeland et al., 2012; Block & Robins, 1993), young adulthood (Chung et al., 2014; Hutteman et al., 2014), middle adulthood (Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022), and later adulthood (Shaw et al., 2010; Wagner, Gerstorf, et al., 2013). Some of these studies reported that a considerable number of people changed even in the opposite direction of the average trend. There is evidence suggesting that the degree of individual differences in self-esteem change varies across the lifespan, with more variability in childhood and older adulthood than in other life phases (Orth et al., 2018). More research is needed, as this pattern might be explained by the scarcity of data for these age groups.

1.3 | Stability of individual differences in self-esteem (rank-order stability)

Rank-order stability, commonly assessed by test-retest correlations, indicates the degree to which individuals in a population keep their relative positions relative to one another over time. For example, high rank-order stability would be present if student A has the highest, student B the middle, and student C the lowest self-esteem level in a school class across several years. Research has generally reported relatively high but not perfect rank-order stabilities (see Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Test-retest correlations naturally vary with the length of the time intervals. A meta-analysis with 3-year intervals yielded a stability of 0.64 (corrected for measurement error; Trzesniewski et al., 2003). Another study reported relatively high rank-order stability that declined with increasing time intervals from 0.93 for 1-year to 0.61 for 10-year intervals and leveled off at an asymptote at a value of 0.4 (Kuster & Orth, 2013). Rank-order stability also seems to vary with age. The stability of individual differences in self-esteem was found to increase from the lowest stability in childhood and adolescence to the highest stability in middle age (Donnellan et al., 2012; Kuster & Orth, 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2003). However, some studies have reported moderate and others high stabilities for early and late life phases (e.g., Wagner et al., 2014).

1.4 | Within-person variability across short-term periods (self-esteem as state)

An ongoing debate is whether self-esteem is more trait- or state-like (see Donnellan, et al., 2011; Trzesniewski et al., 2013). Trait self-esteem refers to stable individual differences or chronic self-evaluations, while state

self-esteem refers to fluctuating and temporal self-evaluations that vary across contexts. Researchers concluded from the high rank-order stabilities comparable to those of the Big Five traits (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) that self-esteem is trait-like (see Orth & Robins, 2014). However, most psychological constructs are neither fully trait- or state-like but contain both components (Hertzog & Nesselroade, 1987). In line with this idea recent research was able to decompose multi-wave data of self-esteem into trait and (smaller) state components (Alessandri et al., 2016; Donnellan et al., 2012). Several researchers argue that self-esteem should be considered as trait and state (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Trzesniewski et al., 2003). Assessing self-esteem as both state and trait and examining their link has great merit for understanding self-esteem development. Scholars generally understand (the relatively slower) trait development as an accumulation of (the faster change) in state manifestations (Roberts & Wood, 2006).

1.5 | Summary and open questions

Self-esteem follows a normative inverted u-shaped trajectory across the lifespan, but individuals also deviate substantially from this trajectory. Individual differences in self-esteem are relatively stable but there are also state components that may help understand self-esteem development. The magnitude of the change indicators varies across age groups, which points to sensitive developmental phases in childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and late adulthood. These findings lead to the question what factors and mechanisms lead to these change patterns? There is currently no theory on self-esteem development. Below, I therefore reviewed theoretical accounts and exemplary evidence from multiple subdisciplines of psychology.

2 | DO LIFE EVENTS DRIVE SELF-ESTEEM CHANGE?

Lifespan theory (Baltes, 1987; Baltes et al., 2006) provides a useful meta-level framework for self-esteem development. It acknowledges that people are open systems that can show significant psychological change across the entire lifespan and that people can follow different developmental trajectories in interaction with the environment (i.e., plasticity). Lifespan theory and also personality developmental theory (Roberts & Wood, 2006) acknowledge biological and environmental drivers of individual development (for an overview of theories, see Specht et al., 2014). Environmental influences and especially life events have received great attention, as they bring manifold changes in life circumstances that demand new affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses relevant for self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2014). Following the distinction between normative and non-normative influences (Baltes, 1987), I reviewed theoretical and empirical evidence for self-esteem change in response to normative and non-normative life events as follows. Given the myriad of studies, the empirical review only covers exemplary studies in two key life domains: social relationships and education/work and favors prospective studies with pre-post designs.

2.1 | Normative life events as contexts of normative and heterogeneous self-esteem development

Normative life events (i.e., life transitions), such as education-to-work and parenthood, are possible explanations for normative self-esteem trajectories. Normative (age-graded) influences are experienced by the majority of the population around a specific age; they are predictable in their onset and similar in their direction (Baltes, 1987). Neo-socioanalytic theory considers normative life events as catalysts of normative personality development (Roberts & Wood, 2006). The so-called personality maturity in young adulthood is argued to be due to the normative investment in adult social roles in this life phase (career, relationship, family), as most individuals of a certain life phase are committed to fulfill these roles (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2008). Normative life events are also considered as contexts

of self-esteem development (Roberts & Helson, 1997). Following developmental task theory, normative life transitions can be seen as an indicator of mastering developmental tasks that people are expected to reach by society (Havighurst, 1972; Hutteman et al., 2014).

2.1.1 | Childhood and adolescence

School transitions have long been considered sensitive developmental periods for self-esteem in childhood and adolescence, as they bring new academic demands and social challenges (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Most studies have found that self-esteem levels were high during elementary school and decreased during the middle school transition in the US (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Seidman et al., 1994; Wigfield et al., 1991), Portugal (Coelho et al., 2020), and Germany (Arens et al., 2013). Some studies (Wigfield et al., 1991) but not others (Coelho et al., 2020) reported that the decline did not persist beyond the first year after the transition. In contrast, other studies found no mean-level change during the middle-school transition (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2019; Proctor & Choi, 1994). Few studies looked beyond mean-level change, but those that did reported significant individual variability in change (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2019; Morin et al., 2013). In summary, research on the middle school transition has yielded mixed results, with several studies finding a decline in self-esteem and some studies reporting stability.

2.1.2 | Young adulthood

In young adulthood, there is a high density of normative life transitions in both relationship and education/work domains. As young adults grow their role repertoire during these transitions, their sense of self is thought to expand, which might explain the average increase in self-esteem in this life phase (Gove et al., 1989). With regard to relationship transitions, starting a long-term romantic relationship (but not the transition into marriage) has been found to have a positive lasting effect on self-esteem in most studies (Lehnart et al., 2010; Luciano & Orth, 2017; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001), but there are also some mixed findings (Neyer & Lehnart, 2007; Wagner et al., 2015). For parenthood, most studies reported declines (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2016; van Scheppingen et al., 2018). The latter study reported declines during pregnancy, increases until 6 months after birth, and gradual decreases thereafter.

With regard to education/work transitions, transitioning out of high school has been linked to increases in self-esteem; increases were small following secondary school and accelerated around a year later (Wagner, Lütcke, et al., 2013). Findings for the college experience point to a drop in the first year and stability thereafter (Chung et al., 2014; Shim et al., 2012). Studies on the education-to-work transition reported small increases in self-esteem. Levels of job beginners were significantly larger than for those who had also graduated from university but did not (yet) start full-time work (Reitz et al., 2020) and those who stayed in school (van der Velde et al., 1995). Some studies (e.g., Wagner, Lütcke, et al., 2013) but not all (Bleidorn et al., 2016) reported significant individual differences in change trajectories. Only a couple of studies compared rank-order stabilities using control-group designs and reported significantly lower stabilities for the comparison groups than for the transition groups who started to work (0.85 vs. 0.51; Reitz et al., 2020) or went on an international study exchange (0.82 vs. 0.68; Hutteman et al., 2015), respectively. Another study found stagnation in rank-order stability after graduation (Wagner, Lütcke, et al., 2013).

Together, self-esteem in young adulthood seems to increase in response to the first relationship and the education-to-work transition but seem to decrease in response to parenthood. Some studies reported reduced lower rank-order stabilities during life events.

2.1.3 | Midlife

Research on midlife is limited. Fewer new normative life events occur and those that happen might be less abrupt (continuous parenting vs. becoming a parent) and less age-graded (promotions at work vs. starting to work). In addition, most people might continue their social roles and over time, peak in their mastery (Erikson, 1968; Hutteman et al., 2014), which might explain the high levels and stability in this life phase.

2.1.4 | Late adulthood

In late adulthood, life events tend to involve an excess of losses over gains in social roles (Baltes, 1987; Roberts & Wood, 2006), which might contribute to the drop in self-esteem. A study with comparison groups reported a decrease in self-esteem in the 5 years before retirement and stability in the 5 years after (Bleidorn & Schwaba, 2018). Widowhood predicted self-esteem negatively in (suboptimal) between-subjects design, although widowed women had higher self-esteem than their married counterparts (Carr, 2004). However, another study found that a history of divorce or widowhood was not related to change in self-esteem (von Soest et al., 2018). In summary, some but not all evidence points to declines in self-esteem in anticipation of retirement and in response to widowhood.

2.2 | Non-normative life events as contexts of heterogeneous self-esteem development

Non-normative life events are not experienced by the majority of individuals of the same age group, such as serious illness or loss of a loved one. As non-normative events happen only to some individuals at various moments in the lifespan, they may trigger change trajectories that deviate from the normative trajectory (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Life-course theory argues that non-normative events, particularly if ill-timed and unexpected, can have lasting consequences that may be stronger than for normative events (Neugarten, 1976). According to Lerner's (1980) just world theory, people tend to believe that people get what they deserve. Negative, uncontrollable events might therefore trigger self-devaluating beliefs (Callan et al., 2014). A meta-analysis on studies with comparison groups has generally reported decreases in self-esteem following negative life events (see Mangelsdorf et al., 2019).

The findings of bereavement effects on self-esteem are mixed. Some studies reported decreases in self-esteem when losing close family members (e.g., Montpetit et al., 2010), other studies reported no self-esteem change (Murrell et al., 1991; Tetzner et al., 2016). A recent study found no overall self-esteem change in response to bereavement (i.e., losing a close other), but a self-esteem increase in people who reported a positive/neutral meaning of the bereavement (Reitz, Weidmann, et al., 2022). Break-ups (Luciano & Orth, 2017) and divorce (Bleidorn et al., 2021) were found to predict declines in self-esteem. Both studies reported significant individual differences in self-esteem trajectories. Furthermore, self-esteem was found to remain stable during (re)employment and to decrease before the beginning of the unemployment transition (Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022; see also Paul & Moser, 2009). Reitz, Luhmann, et al. (2022) found significant individual differences in change trajectories.

In summary, most studies reported self-esteem decreases in response to non-normative negative life events, but a few studies reported stability or even increases.

2.3 | Summary and open questions

In line with lifespan and personality developmental theories, research has generally suggested that life events can trigger self-esteem change. However, single normative life events do not seem to be (sole) drivers of normative trajectories. Several studies suggest that both normative and non-normative life events contribute to individual

difference in change. These findings lead to the questions what are the unique experiences that trigger self-esteem change and how—in short, what are the underlying self-esteem change?

3 | WHICH PROCESSES EXPLAIN SELF-ESTEEM CHANGE IN RESPONSE TO LIFE EVENTS?

3.1 | Temporal processes of self-esteem change during life events

The theories reviewed so far do not specify *how* life events get under the skin. Life events are assumed to influence trait development not directly, but in a bottom-up fashion via continuous short-term situational processes and state change (Roberts & Wood, 2006). For example, a person's self-esteem is not automatically changed by transitioning from education to working life; instead, the psychological experience of the many situations this transition brings in their daily life can trigger self-esteem change. To understand the mechanisms, it is therefore necessary to zoom into processes on shorter time scales.

The TESSERA framework (Triggering situations, Expectancy, States/State expressions, and Reactions) is the first to explicitly detail specific short- and long-term processes underlying personality trait development (Wrzus & Roberts, 2017). Although TESSERA does not focus on self-esteem, many aspects seem suited to guide research on the temporal processes of self-esteem development. Specifically, the framework proposes short-term sequences of triggering situations (e.g., a fresh graduate encountering a novel task at the new job), expectancy (e.g., the new employee's role expectation to perform that task successfully), states/state expressions (e.g., investing in the new task, feeling pride, high level of state self-esteem), and reactions (e.g., positive feedback from the superior). When repeated, these short-term sequences can be transferred into trait development (e.g., increase in self-esteem if the state self-esteem level is higher than the trait level) via reflective processes (e.g., reflecting on one's competence to accomplish this new task and hence, transition) and associative processes (e.g., repeated attention to pleasant triggers, such as praise by the supervisor). Research that informs these potential self-esteem processes has only recently begun but has already provided some promising evidence.

There is first evidence for the sequence in which situations trigger *state expressions* of self-esteem, which in turn get manifested in trait self-esteem. Recent research has shown that state self-esteem fluctuates across moments (Diwan et al., 2022; Hank & Baltes-Götz, 2019), days (Alessandri et al., 2016; Enting & Reitz, 2022), weeks (Geukes et al., 2017), and months (Hutteman et al., 2014). Some of this research was able to link these fluctuations to situations and minor daily events, but more research is needed. Research examining how self-esteem states get translated into self-esteem traits is scarce. An exception is a study that found changes in trait self-esteem across 1 year to be mediated by changes in monthly state self-esteem (Hutteman et al., 2014). In summary, state self-esteem fluctuates across short timespans and state changes seem to explain trait change.

There is evidence suggesting that *emotional processes* might explain life event-induced self-esteem change. Research suggests that increases in positive affect and decreases in negative affect predict increases in daily state self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2002). Given that self-esteem is susceptible to successes and failures, especially self-conscious emotions might help explain the link between triggering situations and state self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Tracy & Robins, 2004). In line with this idea, state self-esteem was found to correlate with the self-conscious emotions (authentic) pride and shame (Chung et al., 2021; for a meta-analysis, see Dickens & Robins, 2020) but not with other emotions (Brown & Marshall, 2001). In the context of life transitions, pride and shame might signal the degree of mastery. For example, a fresh graduate who experiences many moments of success at the first job might feel pride and thus, evaluate their mastery of the work transition positively. Consistent with this idea, within-person changes in pride and self-esteem were positively correlated across months (Diwan et al., 2022). However, daily pride did not explain individual differences in self-esteem change across the education-to-work

transition. In summary, affect, especially self-conscious emotions, seem to be linked to state self-esteem. More research is needed to examine the conditions under which these processes lead to changes in trait self-esteem.

In addition, *reflective processes* might play an important role for life-event induced self-esteem change. Life events and the completion of developmental tasks are thought to trigger identity processes (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972). For example, a young adult transitioning from education-to-work might incorporate their new social role as a worker in their identity. Scholars have increasingly stated that narrative identity, people's internalized life story, plays an important role in processing life experiences (McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006). People's interpretations of previous life events might get reactivated and set the path for psychological adjustment to new life events (McLean et al., 2019). A recent study has examined whether turning point narratives predict self-esteem during the education-to-work transition (van Doeselaar & Reitz, 2022). More agentic and redemptive narratives did not predict trait self-esteem across the 8 months during the transition, but higher levels in narrative agency were associated with greater stability in daily self-esteem. This finding suggests that internalized, agentic life stories may help explain individual differences in state reactivity in self-esteem and, considering the benefits of secure (vs. fragile) self-esteem, be a powerful resource for adjusting to life events (Kernis, 2005). In summary, there is evidence suggesting that reflective processes, including narrative identity, link to state self-esteem during life transitions, but evidence linking it to trait self-esteem is lacking.

Together, I aimed to demonstrate that TESSERA can inform self-esteem development with regard to the temporal process chain of short-term situational processes and states that, over time, get manifested in traits. Many processes and mechanisms might overlap. For example, in the case of the transition to work, daily mastery experiences were shown to both trigger increases in conscientiousness (Reitz et al., *in press*) and self-esteem (Reitz et al., 2020). However, differences in processes underlying personality trait and self-esteem change are possible. Behavioral changes are considered a key mechanism in Big Five trait change. For example, young adults who enter working life are expected to increase in Conscientiousness because of a reward structure for more mature behavior (e.g., meeting deadlines; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). For self-esteem, affective and reflective processes might be, in comparison, relatively more important, which should be examined in future research.

3.2 | Experiences that trigger self-esteem change in response to life events

TESSERA is not specific for self-esteem and therefore does not provide information on the *types* of experiences and mechanisms that trigger self-esteem change in response to life events. Here, self-esteem theories from social-personality psychology provide complementary insights. Self-esteem is thought to wax and wane with one's subjective experience of *success* and *failure* in life (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Hogan & Roberts, 2004). However, it remains unclear in which domains these success and failure experiences are most relevant for self-esteem. There is an ongoing debate, which boils down to a disagreement on whether self-esteem is more a function of agency ("getting ahead") or communion ("getting along"). Agentic content involves competence (task functioning, skills, goal-achievement), whereas communal content involves acceptance (warmth, preservation of relationships and social functioning; Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008). The agency-communion framework is considered useful for understanding self-perceptions (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001).

3.2.1 | Communal experiences

One school of thought posits that social relationships and, more specifically, communal social evaluations play a major role in shaping self-esteem. The most prominent theory of this notion is sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Sociometer theory posits that self-esteem tracks people's social acceptance and inclusion (in later versions: relational value) in social groups. This theory proposes that self-esteem serves an evolutionary function,

as survival depended strongly on maintaining social ties to other people (e.g., for childbearing, access to food). As a result, humans developed a strong concern for their relational value. Think of a person's desire to receive likes on social media or of a person reappraising their desirability after being broken up with. Leary (2005) acknowledged that relational value can also include agentic elements, but communal experiences are considered to be more indicative of people's relational value and hence, have a stronger impact on self-esteem. The mechanism that was thought to underlie the sociometer effect is people's *perceived* relational value. This interpersonal awareness is assumed to lead to psychological responses, including state self-esteem and emotional reactions (e.g., feeling rejected). Leary (2021) now considers the possibility of a sociometer mechanism that can also operate without conscious awareness.

Consistent with this school of thought, communal experiences were found to predict state self-esteem, both in experimental studies in which social inclusion was manipulated (e.g., Leary et al., 1995) and in naturalistic settings with relationship quality as predictor (e.g., Denissen et al., 2008). Koch and Shepperd (2008) reported from a study using experimental manipulation, recall, and hypothetical events that acceptance influenced self-esteem more than did competence. In addition, social relationships, measured by communal characteristics such as warmth, acceptance, relationship quality, were found to predict trait self-esteem (for a meta-analysis, see Harris & Orth, 2019). There is also supporting evidence for the sociometer mechanism: peer nominations in classrooms predicted adolescents' self-esteem via subjective perceptions of their peer acceptance (Reitz et al., 2016).

3.2.2 | Agentic experiences

Another school of thought posits that self-esteem is more strongly influenced by agentic than by communal information. The dual-perspective model states that evaluations of others are dominated by communal considerations, whereas evaluations of oneself are dominated by agentic information (Wojciszke et al., 2011). According to this perspective, perceiving oneself as competent, efficient, and knowledgeable should result in higher self-esteem. The authors acknowledge that self-ascribed communion also relates to self-esteem, but to a much smaller degree. Another theory that considers self-esteem as rather agency-based is hierometer theory, which posits, like sociometer theory, that self-esteem has an evolutionary function. In contrast, hierometer theory proposes that the function of self-esteem is to navigate status hierarchies by tracking levels of social status and regulating status pursuit (Mahadevan et al., 2019).

Consistent with the agentic school of thought, self-ascribed agentic traits were more strongly associated with self-esteem than self-ascribed communal traits in some studies (Wojciszke et al., 2011). Experiences of competence including academic successes (Crocker et al., 2002, 2003) and academic self-enhancement (seeing one's academic successes in an overly positive light; Dufner et al., 2015) were found to predict state and trait self-esteem. In addition, experiences of status including socioeconomic status (Twenge & Campbell, 2002) and being assigned the role of supervisors (Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007) were found to predict higher self-esteem. Gebauer et al. (2015) concluded from a strong association that self-esteem had with extraversion but not with agreeableness that self-esteem is more reflective of getting ahead than of getting along. In addition, several work experiences, including job satisfaction, employment status, and income, but not job success were found to predict self-esteem (for a meta-analysis, see Krauss & Orth, 2021).

3.2.3 | Life-event effects as a function of both agentic and communal experiences?

So, is self-esteem change in response to life events a function of communal or agentic experiences? Several scholars consider both acceptance and competence to be sources of self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Harter, 2012; Howell et al., 2019; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; for evidence, see Mahadevan et al., 2019). There is also evidence suggesting that both trigger self-esteem change during life events. Studies reporting self-esteem decreases during the middle

school transition reported simultaneous decreases in indicators of acceptance and competence (Coelho et al., 2020; Wigfield et al., 1991). Effects of transitions in romantic domains (Luciano & Orth, 2017) and in work domains (Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022) were moderated by quality: people who started satisfying relationships or jobs increased in self-esteem, whereas people who started unsatisfying relationships or jobs remained stable. Fluctuations in state self-esteem were predicted by feelings of social inclusion during the study-abroad transition (Hutteman et al., 2015). Furthermore, positive correlated changes between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction were reported during the transition to motherhood (van Scheppingen et al., 2018).

However, studies rarely compare effects of agentic and communal experiences in the same study. An exception is a study that reported positive correlated changes between self-esteem and achievement- but not affiliation-related daily experiences during the education-to-work transition (Reitz et al., 2020). Together, this review shows that an extension of the dominant focus of the mere experience of life events is indicated, as the *unique* experience in communal *and* agentic domains seem to important drivers of self-esteem change.

3.3 | An integrative process framework of self-esteem change in response to life events

The major current limitation in the research area of self-esteem development is our understanding of the processes of change. Contemporary research is constrained by the lack of an overarching fine-grained process theory, which is needed to move the field forward and to be able to develop more effective interventions (Durbin & Hicks, 2014; Orth & Robins, 2014). A challenge to overcome in order to develop such theory is the still rather strict division of labor between different subdisciplines in psychology. However, an integration of the different theoretical accounts reviewed above holds great potential to obtain a comprehensive picture of self-esteem development. The following section aims at such an integration of the theoretical accounts in an overarching framework (see Figure 1). This framework is thought to serve as a first step towards the development of an encompassing theory of self-esteem development as a function of life events. This integration also holds opportunities for cross-fertilization of lifespan theory, neo-socioanalytic theory, social psychological theories (contingencies; agency-communion), and TESSERA that provide avenues for future research.

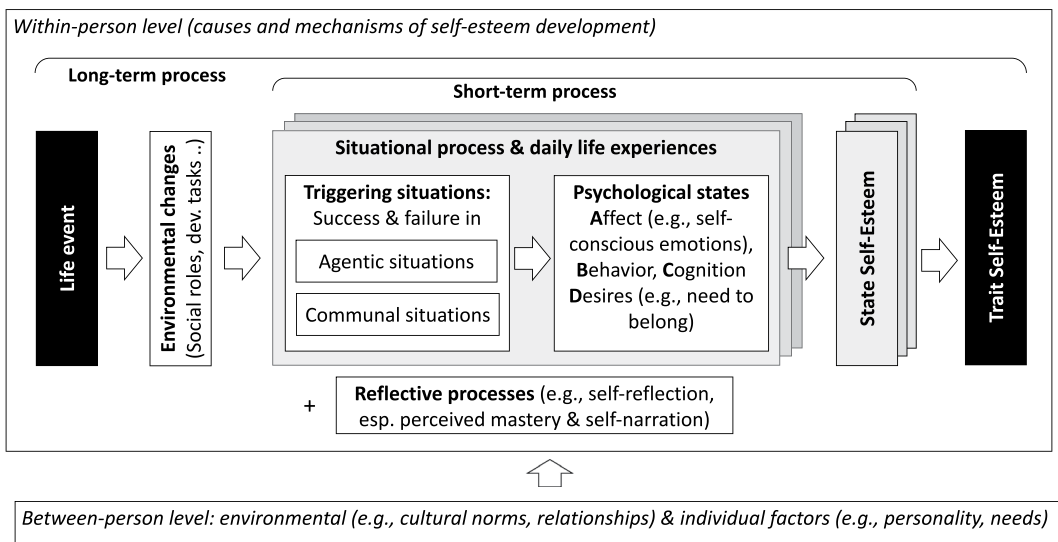


FIGURE 1 A process framework of life-event triggered self-esteem development. Long-term processes of self-esteem trait development as a function of repeated life event-induced short-term processes. See main text for detailed explanations about the processes.

In line with lifespan theory, evidence pointed to self-esteem development being a lifelong process: Self-esteem can change across the entire lifespan in dynamic interactions with environmental changes. The process framework is therefore thought to be applicable across the lifespan. However, self-esteem change seems more likely in certain developmental periods (young adulthood, possibly also childhood, adolescence, and late adulthood) than in others (middle adulthood, when mean levels are rather stable and rank-order stability is highest). Building on neo-socioanalytic theory, self-esteem may be particularly susceptible to change in these early (and possibly later) phases as they typically entail the experience of several major life events that trigger (re)evaluations of the self.

Both normative and non-normative life events may trigger the process chain. At the same time, their differentiation, introduced by lifespan theory, may help us improve our understanding of the different types of changes observed in self-esteem and of the timing of the sensitive developmental periods. Normative life transitions that bring similar changes in the environment in people in the same age group (e.g., being faced with the same developmental task, such as young adults' mastery of the education-to-work transition) may drive normative self-esteem change trajectories. The fact that the most pronounced and robust normative self-esteem change is the increase during young adulthood may be due to the comparatively strong sociocultural norms (i.e., developmental tasks) in this life phase in both agentic (e.g., school and work transitions) and communal (e.g., first romantic relationship, parenthood) life domains (Reitz & Staudinger, 2017). These life events pose similar developmental tasks for this age group that entail possibly more clearly spelled out role demands and expectations (increasing maturity) than in midlife (Neyer et al., 2014). The tasks require similar behavioral, cognitive, and affective adaptations in most young adults, setting them up for growth trajectories. The fact that individual variability in change was found to be greatest in childhood and in older adulthood is, if replicated, in line with this interpretation. These life phases might contain less formalized role demands compared to young adulthood.

The review also pointed to considerable plasticity, as not everyone conforms to the normative self-esteem change trajectories. Even in young adulthood, when change is positive for most, many remain stable or even decrease. Both normative and non-normative life events seem to contribute to this phenomenon. The unique ways in which individuals experience normative life transitions help understand plasticity (e.g., the education-to-work transition might provide an environment for growth for most, but not for all). Non-normative life events, which do not conform to developmental timetables, contribute to individual differences in lifespan trajectories, too. For example, losing a parent may send a young adult on a less favorable self-esteem trajectory than most of their peers, despite the several normative life transitions in this life phase that (may) provide opportunities for growth. This example showcases that several life events can overlap, which creates "noise" (variability in change trajectories) when studying one life event in isolation (see Future Directions). Future research may extend the model by specifying the environmental (e.g., social norms, social relationships) and individual factors (e.g., personality, needs, self-regulation skills) people may differ in the same type of life event that contribute to between-person heterogeneity.

A promising approach to better understand the specific short-term processes of self-esteem change is to apply and modify the TESSERA framework. While the entire TESSERA sequence might be applicable to self-esteem, the present review of theory and empirical evidence pointed to the following to be of greatest relevance (future research may want to extend it by other elements of TESSERA, for example those discussed in the example in Section 3.1). First, life events bring environmental changes that shape daily life experiences. Here, I build on approaches from social psychological self-esteem theories, which can be integrated in TESSERA to delineate the types of (daily life) experiences that might trigger the short-term situational processes: Situations seem to be particularly triggering for state self-esteem that provide information on success and failure (which are particularly important for evaluating one's self-worth) in agentic and communal domains (which both have been found to be linked to self-esteem). Second, these daily life experiences (situations) might trigger psychological states and mechanisms (thoughts, feelings, behavior) and (fluctuations in) state self-esteem. Emotional (e.g., self-conscious emotions) and cognitive states (e.g., self-evaluations of competence and acceptance) and reflective processes (e.g., narratives) might be of particular relevance for triggering expressions of state self-esteem. Third, when self-esteem state levels repeatedly diverge from self-esteem trait levels, these changes in state self-esteem get manifested in changes in trait self-esteem over

time. Note that Figure 1 shows the direction of the process chain between life events and trait self-esteem development described above, but assumed is a dynamic process, including feedback-loops within the short-term processes (see TESSERA) and selection effects in the long-term processes (i.e., individuals seek or create life events and situations; Roberts & Wood, 2006; Sameroff, 2010).

Vice versa, developmental accounts might inform social psychological theories with respect to the agency-communion debate. Self-esteem is considered to be responsive to experiences in domains in which people have staked their self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). The domains most important for self-esteem (i.e., contingencies), may however change as people are confronted with changing developmental tasks (Hutteman et al., 2014). While agentic (e.g., competence) and communal information (e.g., relatedness) might always be relevant to some degree, their relative importance might change. Life events in the education and work domain involve more tasks in agentic domains, whereas life events in the relationship domain involve more tasks in communal domains, relatively speaking. As a result, the situations in daily life that might trigger the TESSERA sequence most might be those that most inform about the mastery of the salient life event or developmental task (Reitz et al., *in press*). There is first evidence for the role of such triggering situations and changing contingencies: for job beginners, change in achievement- but not in affiliation-related daily experiences was linked to self-esteem change (Reitz et al., 2020). Job beginners' self-esteem might have been more contingent on the agentic than the communal domain, because is more indicative of mastering the job transition. This contingency might however change in favor of communal domains during more communal life events such as the first romantic relationship.

4 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article reviewed the state of the field of self-esteem development in the context of life events. Recent research provided important insights into these issues but is also still in many ways inconclusive. The review has demonstrated that the mere experience of life events *per se* provides some but limited explanations of self-esteem development. Instead, individuals seem to experience changes in self-esteem during life events for multiple, idiosyncratic reasons (Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Mund & Neyer, 2016; Reitz et al., 2020). Nevertheless, current research still focuses mostly on population and mean-level change indicators. A greater focus on individual heterogeneity in self-esteem change is necessary to move the field forward.

The substantial individual heterogeneity might in fact be a major cause of the mixed findings for mean-level change. If samples are not representative of the population, they might lead to the heterogeneous findings reported case for childhood, early adolescence, and late adulthood. Instead of treating this heterogeneity as uninteresting error, we might want to consider its potential to unravel causal processes of self-esteem change, as causal effects are heterogeneous (Bolger et al., 2019). As follows, I delineate specific opportunities for theoretical and methodological advancements.

4.1 | Opportunities for theoretical advancements

Integrative theoretical accounts need to be further developed to understand the multiple sources and dynamic processes of self-esteem development. This article provided a first step towards an integrative framework that can guide future research and be developed further. Specifically, future research needs to corroborate the temporal process chain that link life events via repeated short-term processes to trait self-esteem. In addition, other domains, components, and pathways need to be studied, such as neurological and biological factors (e.g., to link stress to adjustment to life events; Ford & Collins, 2010) and changes in cognitive abilities and health (e.g., to understand the change patterns in early life; Harter, 2012; and late life; von Soest et al., 2018). The short-term processes delineated and informed by TESSERA should be tested in intervention research (Allemand & Flückiger, 2017). A good understanding

of the situations in daily life that trigger state self-esteem, the psychological processes, and the circumstances under which state changes get manifested in trait changes (for which evidence is currently lacking) is necessary to develop successful (tailored) interventions.

Another major avenue for future research is to examine the sources of individual heterogeneity in all phases of the change sequence, which provides a unique opportunity for theory development. Especially the role of individual contingencies should be studied further (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). For example, people with a high competence motive might respond more strongly to daily successes at work and to work transitions (Hofer & Busch, 2011). Furthermore, recent research has begun to study the moderating effects of event characteristics (e.g., valence, impact; Luhmann et al., 2021) and situation characteristics (e.g., Rauthmann & Sherman, 2015). While these taxonomies are useful first steps to delve more into environmental influences, more tailored, theory-driven taxonomies for self-esteem should be developed. Such taxonomies should capture success and failure experiences in agentic and communal domains. Given their importance for self-esteem development, the role of social relationships should be studied more (Reitz et al., 2014). For example, romantic partners' shared environment was shown to influence self-esteem (Orth et al., 2018) and self-esteem decreased in response to a negative bereavement experience by a partner (Reitz, Weidmann, et al., 2022).

Future research should simultaneously study change in self-esteem and in sibling constructs (constructs that are conceptually and/or empirically linked, but distinct; Lawson & Robins, 2021). The degree of similarity in environmental antecedents provides insights into whether constructs are influenced by the same, broadly acting mechanism or by unique, narrowly acting mechanisms (Soto & John, 2012). A few studies have identified unique and shared trajectories and antecedents of self-esteem and narcissism (Lawson & Robins, 2021) and self-esteem and life satisfaction (Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022; Reitz, Weidmann, et al., 2022). The latter studies suggest that reflective processes might uniquely underlie self-esteem change during negative life events.

4.2 | Opportunities for methodological advancements

Prospective designs with multiple, relatively frequent measurement occasions across several years before and after life events are needed to capture the precise shape of change trajectories (Luhmann et al., 2014). Comparison groups that do not experience the life event should be included to avoid mistaking maturational for event-induced change. Ideally, propensity-score matching should be used, which allows to analyze life event data so that it mimics features of randomized controlled trials and thereby reduces the effects of confounding factors (Austin, 2011). Existing studies that met these requirements found self-esteem declines before retirement and unemployment and increases or stability after the events (Bleidorn & Schwaba, 2018; Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022), which points to anticipatory reflective (identity) processes.

Large, nationally representative panel data facilitate analysis of large sample sizes, which is needed to obtain adequate power to model heterogeneity in change. In addition, panels' multiple waves facilitate to examine effects of multiple (i.e., repeated or simultaneous) life events, which can help explain individual variability in change (see Reitz, Luhmann, et al., 2022). Furthermore, lifespan samples should be used to examine whether contingencies change across the lifespan and whether life events have different effects at different ages (e.g., at ages when events are more or less normative; Hutteman et al., 2014). In addition, Longitudinal Experience-Wide Association Studies can assess multiple sources of self-esteem change (Bleidorn et al., 2020).

Insights into fast-paced change processes cannot be obtained via panel studies, but require designs with high temporal resolution. Intensive longitudinal designs (ILD) contain repeated phases of high-density ambulatory assessments such as app-based experience sampling or daily diary assessments (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). ILD allow researchers to obtain rich assessments of the unfolding of life events in daily life as it is lived with very little retrospection and thus, bias. Fast (moments, days) and slow (years) change processes *within* individuals and differences *between* individuals in change processes can be captured. Researchers should be aware of measurement reactivity biases

using ILD, which can be addressed by planned missingness (Arslan et al., 2021). Another challenge is that measurement burst designs that include repeated phases of intense assessments might miss the critical developmental phase and experiences. If unknown, one can use continuous intensive designs (e.g., with assessments every day for longer periods) or, if not possible due to the high participant burden, once a week or month.

5 | CONCLUSION

This article reviewed the state of the field of self-esteem development with regard to three major issues: Can and does self-esteem change? Do life events drive self-esteem change? What processes explain self-esteem change during life events? Research has provided first answers. Self-esteem changes systematically across the lifespan, it is relatively stable but can be considered a state that fluctuates around its trait level in response to environmental conditions. In the quest for factors that explain self-esteem development, there has been a recent surge in interest in life events. However, mean-level changes in response to life events were often modest in magnitude and sometimes non-existent. Nevertheless, life events seem to constitute sensitive phases for self-esteem development as they were consistently found to trigger significant individual differences in self-esteem change. To pave the way for further theoretical developments that are much needed, I integrated multiple theoretical perspectives in an overarching process framework. The framework specifies short- and long-term processes of self-esteem, which provides opportunities for theoretical and methodological advancements. The specific dynamic long- and short-term processes underlying self-esteem development during life events is a major avenue for future research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that I have no conflict of interest to disclose. Neither I nor any member of my immediate family have a significant financial arrangement or affiliation with any product or services used or discussed in my paper, nor any potential bias against another product or service.

ORCID

Anne K. Reitz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7286-2257>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Reitz' research is located at the intersection of personality, social, and developmental psychology; she has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Personality*, *Journal of Research in Personality*, *Journal of Personality*, *Developmental Psychology*, and *Psychological Methods*, among other outlets. Anne is interested in the development of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and personality in the context of life events and social relationships. Her recent publications examine the development of self-esteem and life satisfaction during major life events (bereavement: Reitz, Weidmann et al., 2022; unemployment and employment: Reitz, Luhmann et al., 2022; and the education-to-work transition; Reitz et al., 2020; Diwan et al., in revision). She has held fellowships from International Max Planck Research School on the Life Course, German Research Foundation, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions of the European Commission. Anne is currently an Assistant Professor at Tilburg University, the Netherlands, where she teaches, among other courses, *Theoretical Models of Individual Differences*. Before coming to Tilburg University, Anne conducted postdoctoral research at Columbia University and New York University. She holds a MSc in Psychology from Philipps University Marburg and a PhD in Psychology from Humboldt University Berlin.

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