

Factors of Adolescent Self-Concept:  
Mass Mediated, Peer, and Family Communication

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the main factors that cause an influence to the self-image and self-esteem of an adolescent. Specifically, this paper focuses on what is believed to be the three primary factors of flux to the self-image and self-esteem of an adolescent: mass mediated social influences, peer interactions, and messages received from family members. The review of literature in this paper leads to two research questions: (1) What factor seems to cause the greatest amount of increased self-esteem for an adolescent who does not have siblings? (2) What factor seems to cause the greatest amount of decreased self-esteem for an adolescent who does not have siblings? The methods chosen to answer these research questions would be experimental research and focus groups.

Despite the amount of research that has been conducted with the hopes of better understanding the development of an individual's self-concept, the vast number of factors affecting a self-concept results in the inability to definitively label the greatest factor among shaping a self-concept. Although scholars agree that communication is a main factor of self-concept, the debate centers on what medium of communication affects the self-concept to the highest extent. While one study (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986) argues that mass media has the greatest effect on self-concept, another (Rill, Baiocchi, Hopper, Denker, & Olson, 2009) suggests that peer interaction is the most significant contributing factor to affecting self-concept, while another (Lanza-Kaduce & Webb, 1992) claims that the messages received from the family have the greatest bearing on self-concept.

The importance of being able to accurately understand the development of the self-concept is crucial because of the significance self-esteem has on the level of satisfaction regarding one's life. Most importantly, Dailey (2009) stressed the importance of psychological development, which is specifically essential during the middle and late adolescent periods. During this psychological development, which continues throughout the life span, the adolescent years are specifically sensitive to the development of personality, self-esteem, and self-conception. This paper intends to investigate what is believed to be the three primary factors of a self-concept: mass mediated social influences, peer communication, and family communication.

## **Literature Review**

### **Mass Mediated Social Influences**

The adolescent time period is a difficult time period when the self-esteem and self-concept of an individual is particularly susceptible to being damaged, or at least challenged. Chaplin and John (2007) claimed that children become highly critical of their previously

constructed self-concept due to physical changes and the tensions between their ideal self and how they see themselves during the adolescent time period. The effects of mass mediated social influences are linked to a lowering of self-esteem. Due to the lowered sense of self-esteem, adolescents look to the external world, including people and possessions, for an increase of self-esteem and the reconstruction of their self-images (Chaplin & John, 2007).

**Celebrity worship.** During a time when children are typically in a state of lowered self-esteem, children look to others for guidance and confirmation in the decisions they make for themselves. North, Sheridan, Maltby, and Gillett (2007) suggested that the idolizing of celebrities occurs so naturally that finding empirical evidence to definitely show effects on self-esteem may not be possible. This activity, known as entertainment social celebrity worship, is only one form of celebrity worship that is explored among 553 participants who were self-selected from Europe and North America only. This particular study, conducted through questionnaire method, revealed that intense personal celebrity worship and borderline pathological celebrity worship also occur and do have positive and negative effects regarding adolescent self-esteem. Intense personal celebrity worship, the emulating of a single celebrity or multiple celebrities with desirable characteristics or features, renders an increase in self-esteem and stability in the reconstruction of the self-concept. Borderline pathological celebrity worship, the attempt to emulate an individual celebrity as a whole, renders a decrease in self-esteem due to the inability of an adolescent to become acceptably similar to his or her worshiped celebrity.

**Materialism.** During the adolescent time period, children frequently search for external factors, tangible and intangible, to use as enhancers of their self-concept. Chaplin and John (2007) claimed that children focus on material possessions as a means to develop the poor self-concept they have of themselves; however, this leads to the material possessions acquired by the

adolescent to act as a way for the child to define themselves. Instead of simply possessing material objects, the child will utilize his or her material possessions as a benchmark for self-worth (Chaplin & John, 2007). The danger of material possessions acting as the foundation of self-esteem and self-image are enveloped in the child requiring self-esteem to be boosted by nothing other than material objects. For adolescents, self-esteem and materialism are related in an inverse relationship. Thus, whereas an adolescent with high self-esteem will express low tendencies of materialism, an adolescent with low self-esteem will express high tendencies of materialism. Furthermore, this study was successful in revealing the affects the independent variable of self-esteem has on the dependent variable of materialism. "By priming higher levels of self-esteem, we were able to provide evidence of the causal role that self-esteem plays in fostering materialistic orientations" (Chaplin & John, 2007, p. 489). Finally, this particular study suggested that although materialism emerges in the adolescent period, materialism is primarily caused due to a perceived lack of social acceptance. For this reason, as acceptance among peers increases, self-esteem increases, which leads to a decrease in materialism. This claim is made by Chaplin and John due to self-esteem manipulation that indicated the importance of peer acceptance as the most effective way to strengthen self-esteem, and in doing so, minimize the desire for material goods.

### **Peer Communication**

The primary factor of peer communication seems to have the greatest influence on temporary fluctuations of the self-esteem of an adolescent (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). This indicates that the perceived level of acceptance by peers has a significant level of importance to a child. During the reconstruction of the self-concept during the adolescent time period, children are prone to experiment with activities to achieve not only attention, but also acceptance by peer

groups (Greene & Banerjee, 2008). This study by Greene and Banerjee (2008) specifically looked at adolescents' responses to cigarette offers by peers, but Greene and Banerjee suggested that adolescent smoking is one of numerous ways children attempt to become socially accepted. Through trial and error, children attempt to find their place within society's expectations. Once perceived acceptance occurs, however, the battle to construct an acceptable self-concept is not complete (Robert & Gary, 1986). The child must then assess whether he is comfortable or satisfied with the way he is viewed by his peers.

**Peer acceptance.** The social acceptance of a child is crucial during the adolescent time period. When a child believes social acceptance has occurred, a number of positive effects transpire. Rill, Baiocchi, Hopper, Denker, and Olson (2009) suggested that perceived commitment from romantic partners or within interpersonal relationships results in the experience of greater levels of self-esteem and also an increased level of commitment towards the other individual or individuals. As perceived commitment and acceptance was increased, so was self-esteem. This increase in self-esteem lead the adolescents to create temporarily-stable self-concepts based on romantic partners or interpersonal relationships. Obviously, this temporary increase in self-esteem can be negated by the rejection of the romantic partner or interpersonal relationship, but as stated before, peer communication has a great influence on temporary adolescent self-esteem.

A factor of acceptance from peer groups includes acceptance based on performance (Andrews, 1984). Successfully performing within a situation can result in achieving acceptance and can also result in the reinforcement of performance-self-esteem for the child. Performance-self-esteem is a result of acceptance from peers due to performance within a situation, but performance-self-esteem can also lead to an increase of acceptance from peers. If a child feels

confident when certain action needs to be taken during a particular situation, peers might not only find the child socially acceptable, but also the peer group may label the child as a leader. Furthermore, the child may begin to create a self-fulfilling prophecy where success is the dominant attitude. Although performance-self-esteem may seem to be contextually bound, having confidence within a specific area often times correlates to an increase in self-esteem in general.

**Peer rejection.** All adolescents desire to fulfill the criteria peer groups have constructed to achieve social acceptance (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). These constructed social norms are reinforced over time by the behaviors of those who are within the peer group. Even if the child is not violating aspects of the social norms, many adolescents have self-esteem levels that are so fragile that they may think they are outside the acceptable boundaries of behavior when a member of the peer group simply mentions some criteria of the social norm. One example to illustrate this concept is the self-images adolescent girls have regarding their weights and physical body images (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). Even though a girl has a socially accepted physical appearance, her self-esteem may be so miniscule that the mentioning of body images could cause her to feel insecure, targeted, or unaccepted by the peer group. Just as acceptance by peers can dramatically increase self-esteem and stabilize self-concept, rejection by peers can be devastating to self-esteem and cause the self-concept to be shattered (Matsunaga, 2011). To a large degree, the self-concept cannot be reconstructed and stabilized without confirmation from a child's peer group. Without confirmation from the peer group, the child is required to make decisions individually during the time when external factors are most prevalent throughout decision making (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986).

## **Family Communication**

For many adolescents, the relationships among family members are far more stable, and therefore, can have much greater effects on self-concept (Lanza-Kaduce & Webb, 1992).

Although families can provide more stability for an adolescent, the uniqueness of each individual and the uniqueness of each family cannot be discounted as a factor of temporary damage to self-concept and the temporary diminishing of self-esteem (Shimkowski & Schrodt, 2012).

Throughout the continuous changes that occur regarding self-concept, the influences that family members have may be so prevalent to a child because family relationships are less likely to be dissolved like peer relationships (Dailey, 2009). Just as with relationships among peers, adolescents are affected by confirmation and challenges from family members. Once again, these messages of confirmation and challenges are verbal and nonverbal. Although the significance of whether the messages are communicated verbally or nonverbally is relatively unknown, there is research to indicate that different family members have differing levels of significance. Under the branch of family members, two subcategories exist: parents and siblings.

**Effects from parents.** In regards to the messages communicated by parents, the messages from mothers affect different factors of a child's self-concept than the messages communicated by fathers (Dailey, 2009). This study suggests that challenges from the mother have significant effects on the self-esteem of a late adolescent, with confirmations from the father having a greater influence on the personality of an adolescent. Still, the confirmation of the father does have a significant influence on the self-esteem of the child, but the father's confirmation holds greater weight during the earlier stages of adolescents. Dailey (2009) offers an explanation for this change in importance from father in earlier adolescence to the growing importance of challenges offered by the mother during the latter part of adolescence. This



suggestion made by Dailey (2009) as to why the father's confirmation is more influential during the earlier stage of adolescence is the idea that fathers are not expected to be the primary nurturer of children, and therefore, the messages of confirmation communicated by the father are held with more weight because they are less expected. In another study conducted by Dailey (2010), he suggested that fathers who are perceived as warm, attentive, and affectionate may be the primary factor in developing a child's autonomy and individuality. Mothers on the other hand, seem to have a significant factor on self-esteem through challenging their children. The challenges act as a way of pushing adolescents as a way of achieving a greater sense of self. This role of challenger is also generally unexpected by the children. In another study conducted by Schrod, Ledbetter, and Ohrt (2007), it is suggested that mothers who seem unconditionally affectionate towards their children cause a reduction of stress and increase of self-esteem within their children. This claim is difficult to support with empirical data, however, because the mother is typically the parent who supplies the children with the higher level of affection.

**Effects from siblings.** Schrod, Ledbetter, Ohrt (2007) claimed that creating a climate within a family where all members are encouraged to interact freely despite the topic results in increased self-esteem for an adolescent. Although this may initially seem to be a task for the parents, the children and siblings possess the responsibility of whether they will act in a way that this type of family climate is realized, or whether this type of climate is simply imagined. The quality of relationship and the confirmation among siblings is argued to be one of the most important factors for increasing self-esteem among adolescents (Dailey, 2010). This is argued on the presupposition that children typically believe that their parents are obligated to have a positive view of them, while their siblings are not obligated in this way. Furthermore, this claim argues that achieving acceptance from siblings increases self-esteem and stabilizes self-concept

more than other factors. Also, challenges from siblings create struggles in furthering the development of self-concept as well as difficulty in developing autonomy. Dailey (2010) also suggested that if challenges exist in a ratio that greatly outweighs confirmation and acceptance, adolescents could become susceptible to emulating siblings with hopes of achieving acceptance. Dailey (2010) stressed that this emulation, which is similar to borderline pathological celebrity worship (North, Sheridan, Maltby, & Gillett, 2007), may weaken autonomy and therefore may “coerce adolescents into modeling siblings’ actions and opinions rather than exploring and developing their own” (p. 610).

Moving forward, factors affecting adolescent self-concept and self-esteem should be viewed as holistic with the factors of mass mediated messages, messages from peers, and messages from family members all having some influence on self-esteem and self-concept. After discussing literature based on previously conducted research, however, the acceptance and challenges of siblings seem to indicate the greatest effect on the self-concept and self-esteem of an adolescent. With that stated, the method that follows will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What factor seems to cause the greatest amount of increased self-esteem for an adolescent who does not have siblings?
- (2) What factor seems to cause the greatest amount of decreased self-esteem for an adolescent who does not have siblings?

## Methodology

In attempt to answer the research questions, a combination of experimental research and focus groups would be used. The nature of this study would require both quantitative research and qualitative research to fully answer the research questions. The quantitative research method, experimental research, would be utilized so the research team would have the ability to manipulate the factors being tested. This study would be attempting to discover which factor has the greatest influence on the self-esteem of an adolescent who does not have siblings. This study would be focused on determining causality, and therefore, being able to identify the factor that has the greatest influence among the participants is essential. The qualitative research method, focus groups, would be used so the research team might better understand how the participants were affected throughout the experiments. The focus groups would be used as extended conversations after the experiment was conducted so the participants could share comments that were not necessarily reflective throughout the experiment. Self-esteem is highly subjective and expressed differently by each participant. The participants must have the opportunity to express which factors affected their self-esteem levels most. Without focus groups, the research team might misinterpret the results of the participants.

**Sampling.** For the purpose of this study, the method used to acquire the sample of participants would be based on inclusion criterion. The two inclusion criterion would be: (1) only adolescents could participate, (2) the adolescent must be an only child. The second criteria, the adolescent must be an only child, requires the adolescent to not have any step or half siblings. In addition to the use of inclusion criterion, this study would rely on volunteer sampling for the finding of the adolescents who would be willing to participate in the study. Unfortunately, the use of volunteer sampling could cause a degree of bias in the results of the study because the

volunteers would be likely to have a higher degree of self-esteem than those who would not be willing to participate. However, this would not necessarily be detrimental to the findings of this study because this study would focus on what increases and decreases self-esteem. This study would not be concerned with the prior levels of self-esteem among the participants. The adolescents who would participate in the study would be found in various local middle schools. The participants would not be selected from local elementary schools or from local high schools as well because the age differences could render discrepancies within the data collected due to the age differences among the participants.

**Procedures.** If this study were to be conducted, social mediated messages, messages from peers, and messages from parents would be manipulated. By manipulating these variables, the variable that has the greatest influence on the self-esteem of an adolescent would hopefully be revealed. All conversations would be video and audio recorded so the effects of the comments during the conversations could be analyzed at a later time. The participants would be divided into groups with approximately the same number of participants in each group.

The first factor that would be assessed would be peer communication. The adolescents would be divided once again into smaller groups, and the participants would then be instructed to have conversations with one another. The purpose of these conversations would be to create a more intimate relationship among the participants. Once the participants seem to be well associated with one another, the facilitator of the group would begin directing the conversations by announcing topics to be discussed. These topics would include conversations regarding how one adolescent felt about aspects of the other participants. For example, if the facilitator directed the conversation to focus on the wardrobe of the participants, the participants would have conversations with one another regarding how they felt about how the other participants dressed.

To evaluate the effects of the parent communication, the parents would be asked to participant. With the participants remaining in their small groups, each participant would be given an envelope that contained complements the parents had written about their own individual child. Each set of parents would be asked to write an equal number of complements; however, the children would not receive all the complements at the same time. Instead, the facilitators would administer the complements to the participants in different quantities. Thus, some participants would have more complements than other participants at the same time. This distribution of complements would continue at an unequal rate until all complements are administered. This would be done to reveal the possibility of the amount of acceptance one perceives from his or her parents influencing self-esteem.

Finally, the effects of social mediated messages would be analyzed. To do this, the participants would indicate their favorite celebrities and role models. After indicating the celebrities that the participants value, the participants would be instructed to describe by writing why they idolize those individuals and assess how they view themselves in relationship to their role models. The participants would also be asked to describe what they believe the ideal individual contains: money, possessions, attractiveness, reputable career, family, etc. The participants would then be asked to rate themselves using a scale, one through ten, to indicate where they believe they are compared to the description provided of what creates the ideal individual. After reflecting on their favorite celebrities, the experiment would be considered finalized and the data would begin to be coded.

After coding the data from the three portions of the experiment, the small groups would be asked to participate in a focus group with the same participants they were with throughout the experiment. The facilitator would be educated on each participant's responses and reactions to

the manipulated variables. Using the information collected from the experiment, the facilitator would ask the participants to discuss how they internally reacted to the changes in peer communication, family communication, and mass mediated messages. With the data gathered during the experiment and within the focus groups, the factor that influences the self-esteem of an adolescent without siblings would hopefully be identified.

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