



Qualitative Study on Self-Concept and Self-Esteem Developmental Stages in ... Kabiru, M. A., Et. al. (2026)

Qualitative Study on Self-Concept and Self-Esteem Developmental Stages in an Individual: A Theoretical Approach

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Abstract

Self-concept and self-esteem are central constructs in developmental psychology that shape individuals' cognition, emotions, social relationships, and overall life adjustment. Self-concept refers to individuals' beliefs and perceptions about their abilities, personality, appearance, and social roles. Self-esteem refers to individuals' evaluation of their own worth, encompassing feelings of confidence and value. Although related, self-concept describes what people think about themselves, while self-esteem reflects how they feel about those perceptions. The development of self-concept and self-esteem begins in early childhood and continues through adolescence, adulthood, and old age. This process is shaped by several factors, including biological growth, cognitive development, family relationships, peer interactions, cultural influences, and life experiences. Early family support and secure attachment form the foundation of self-worth, while later cognitive growth enables more complex self-understanding and social comparison. This perspective is grounded in major developmental theories proposed by Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Charles Horton Cooley, and Lev Vygotsky, which explain how identity and self-worth emerge through psychological development and social interaction. Understanding how self-concept and self-esteem develop across the lifespan is important for improving education, parenting, counseling, and mental health practices. Encouraging supportive environments, positive feedback, and opportunities for personal growth helps individuals build confidence, resilience, and a stable sense of identity.

Keywords: self-concept, self-esteem, development, identity formation, psychosocial development.

Introduction

Self-concept refers to the organized set of beliefs and perceptions individuals hold about themselves, including abilities, social roles, physical characteristics, values, and personality traits (Marsh & Craven, 2020). These constructs play a central role in shaping self-perception, interpretation of experiences, and social interactions. Self-concept refers to the organized set of beliefs and perceptions individuals hold about themselves, including abilities, social roles, physical characteristics, values, and personality traits (Marsh & Craven, 2020). Self-esteem, on the other hand, represents the evaluative and emotional dimension of the self, reflecting the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as competent, valuable, and worthy of respect although these concepts are closely related, they are conceptually distinct (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2020). An individual may possess a clear understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses (self-concept) while still experiencing variations in feelings of self-worth (self-esteem) depending on social experiences and contextual feedback (Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021). Research in developmental psychology indicates that self-concept and self-esteem begin to emerge early in childhood and continue to evolve throughout adolescence, adulthood, and late adulthood (Orth & Robins, 2019). Early childhood experiences, particularly interactions with parents and caregivers, provide the foundation for a child's initial sense of self and personal worth (Groh *et al.*, 2020). As children grow, cognitive development enables them to construct more complex and differentiated self-descriptions. During middle childhood and adolescence, individuals begin to engage in social comparison and become increasingly aware of societal expectations, peer evaluations, and personal achievements, all of which influence the development of self-esteem and identity (Orth & Robins, 2019; Meeus, 2020).

Developmental psychology provides several theoretical frameworks that explain how self-concept and self-esteem evolve over time. One influential perspective is the psychosocial development theory proposed by Erik Erikson, which suggests that individuals pass through a series of developmental stages characterized by psychosocial crises that influence identity



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formation and self-worth (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, successful resolution of these developmental challenges contributes to a positive sense of identity and stable self-esteem. For instance, experiences of competence during childhood support the development of confidence, while failure or social rejection may contribute to feelings of inferiority (Côté & Levine, 2021). Another, important theoretical perspective is the cognitive developmental theory advanced by Jean Piaget, which emphasizes the role of cognitive maturation in shaping children's understanding of themselves. Piaget's theory suggests that as children progress through different stages of cognitive development, their capacity to think abstractly and reflect on their personal characteristics increases (Piaget, 1972; Demetriou *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, young children tend to describe themselves in simple and concrete terms, whereas adolescents and adults develop more complex, multidimensional self-concepts that integrate psychological traits, beliefs, and personal values (Harter, 2018).

Social interaction also plays a critical role in the formation of self-concept and self-esteem. The concept of the "looking-glass self," introduced by Charles Horton Cooley, suggests that individuals develop their self-perceptions through interactions with others and by interpreting how they believe others view them (Cooley, 1902; Syed & McLean, 2020). Similarly, the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky emphasizes that social relationships, language, and cultural practices are essential in shaping cognitive and psychological development (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2021). Through interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and the broader social environment, individuals receive feedback that influences their perceptions of competence, social acceptance, and self-worth. In recent years, contemporary research has further highlighted the importance of contextual factors such as family environment, educational experiences, peer relationships, cultural norms, and digital media in shaping self-concept and self-esteem. Studies have shown that supportive parenting, positive school environments, and healthy peer relationships are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and stronger identity development (Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021; Ybrandt, 2019). Conversely, negative social comparisons, bullying, and unrealistic social media portrayals may contribute to low self-esteem, especially among adolescents (Fardouly *et al.*, 2020; Orth & Robins, 2019). In addition, cultural values and societal expectations influence how individuals evaluate themselves and define their personal identities (Heine *et al.*, 2020). Understandingly, the developmental trajectory of self-concept and self-esteem is therefore essential for promoting psychological well-being and healthy personal development. These constructs influence important outcomes such as academic motivation, emotional resilience, social competence, career development, and mental health (Robins *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, educators, parents, counselors, and policymakers play an important role in creating supportive environments that encourage positive self-perception, identity exploration, and personal growth. This paper therefore examines how self-concept and self-esteem develop across major stages of the lifespan from infancy and childhood to adolescence and adulthood while highlighting the biological, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors that shape these processes.

Theoretical Foundations

Psychosocial Theory

The psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson provides a foundational framework. Erikson proposed eight stages of psychosocial development, each involving a developmental "crisis" that must be navigated for healthy personality and identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Côté & Levine, 2021). These crises shape both self-perception (self-concept) and self-evaluation (self-esteem). Successful resolution at each stage fosters adaptive psychological growth, whereas unresolved challenges may contribute to self-doubt or low self-esteem. During the first stage, Trust versus Mistrust (infancy, 0–2 years), the quality of caregiving and early attachment relationships establishes the foundation for trust and security. Infants who experience responsive and consistent caregiving develop a sense of safety and basic self-worth, which contributes to later confidence and emotional resilience (Groh *et al.*, 2020; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2021). In Industry versus Inferiority (middle childhood, 6–12 years), children become aware of their abilities and compare themselves to peers. Success in academic, social, or extracurricular tasks fosters feelings of competence and enhances self-esteem, while repeated failures or negative feedback may result in feelings of inferiority (Erikson, 1968; Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021). This stage is critical for developing a realistic and multifaceted self-concept that encompasses personal achievements, social skills, and cognitive capabilities. Adolescence is characterized by the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion (12–18 years), which centers on identity exploration. Teenagers integrate prior experiences, social roles, and personal values to form a coherent sense of self. Successful identity formation supports stable self-esteem and self-concept, whereas confusion or pressure from peers, societal expectations, or social media may contribute to insecurity and fluctuating self-worth (Orth & Robins, 2019; Meeus,



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2020). Research indicates that positive resolution of these psychosocial crises is associated with higher global self-esteem, better emotional regulation, and more adaptive social functioning across adolescence and adulthood (Orth *et al.*, 2018; Syed & McLean, 2020). Contemporary studies also suggest that supportive family environments, mentorship, and opportunities for skill development can buffer the negative effects of unresolved psychosocial challenges (Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021).

Cognitive Development Theory

The cognitive developmental theory of Jean Piaget explains how self-concept evolves alongside cognitive growth. Piaget's cognitive development theory provides a framework for understanding how self-concept evolves in tandem with children's thinking abilities. Piaget argued that children progress through distinct stages of cognitive development, each of which shapes their capacity to understand themselves and the world. In the preoperational stage (approximately ages 2–7), children describe themselves in concrete, observable terms, focusing on physical attributes, possessions, or simple behaviors, such as “I am fast” or “I have a toy” (Piaget, 1972; Demetriou *et al.*, 2020). At this stage, self-concept is largely based on immediate experiences and perceptible qualities. As children advance into the concrete operational stage (approximately ages 7–11), they begin to understand relationships, rules, and cause-effect connections, which allows for more nuanced and multidimensional self-descriptions. With the onset of formal operational thinking during adolescence (approximately ages 12 and above), individuals develop the ability to think abstractly and reflect on internal characteristics, beliefs, and values. Adolescents can integrate traits such as morality, empathy, and personality into a coherent self-concept, enabling them to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses more critically (Harter, 2018; Demetriou *et al.*, 2020). Research suggests that this cognitive maturation is crucial for the formation of stable self-esteem and identity, as adolescents can compare themselves to broader social standards and internalized ideals (Orth & Robins, 2019; Meeus, 2020). Furthermore, the ability to consider hypothetical scenarios, anticipate future outcomes, and engage in perspective-taking enhances self-reflection and promotes adaptive personal growth.

Social Interactionist Perspective

The development of self-concept is not solely a cognitive process; social interaction plays a pivotal role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves. Charles Horton Cooley introduced the concept of the “looking-glass self”, suggesting that individuals form their self-concepts by interpreting how they believe others perceive and evaluate them (Cooley, 1902; Syed & McLean, 2020). In this view, self-concept is constructed through social feedback, mirroring, and the internalization of others' attitudes, emphasizing the relational nature of identity development. Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights that cognitive and personal development occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others and the use of cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and social practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2021). Vygotsky emphasized that social experiences shape thinking and self-understanding, suggesting that the development of self-concept and self-esteem is deeply embedded within cultural and social contexts. Contemporary research supports these views, indicating that peer relationships, mentorship, family feedback, and culturally mediated experiences significantly influence how children and adolescents evaluate themselves and develop feelings of competence and self-worth (Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021; Ybrandt, 2019). Together, Piaget's cognitive framework and the social interactionist perspective provide complementary insights. While cognitive maturation enables individuals to understand abstract traits and construct multidimensional self-concepts, social experiences provide evaluative feedback that shapes emotional responses and self-esteem. This integrated approach highlights the interplay between individual cognitive development and social context in the formation of a coherent and positive self-concept across developmental stages.

Development across Stages

Infancy (0–2 Years)

During infancy, the foundation for self-awareness begins to emerge. By approximately 18 to 24 months, many children demonstrate self-recognition, such as the ability to identify themselves in a mirror (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 2020). Secure attachment relationships with caregivers play a critical role in establishing early feelings of trust and worth. While self-esteem is not fully developed at this stage, consistent emotional attunement and responsiveness from caregivers provide the basis for later self-worth and confidence (Groh *et al.*, 2020; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2021).

Early Childhood (2–6 Years)

In early childhood, children develop categorical self-descriptions, focusing on observable traits such as physical appearance, possessions, and basic abilities (Harter, 2018). At this stage, self-esteem is typically unrealistically high, as young children have limited capacity for social comparison. Positive reinforcement from caregivers, teachers, and other



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significant adults strongly influences the child's emerging self-concept and feelings of competence (Marsh & Craven, 2020).

Middle Childhood (6–12 Years)

During middle childhood, advances in cognition and social awareness allow children to engage in social comparison with peers, which significantly impacts self-esteem. Academic performance, athletic ability, and peer acceptance become prominent determinants of self-evaluation. Consistent with Erikson's industry versus inferiority stage, success in school, extracurricular activities, and social interactions fosters feelings of competence, whereas repeated failure may contribute to feelings of inadequacy (Erikson, 1968; Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, children begin to develop domain-specific self-concepts, differentiating their abilities across academic, social, and physical domains (Harter, 2018).

Adolescence (12–18 Years)

Adolescence is a pivotal period for identity formation, characterized by abstract thinking and the ability to integrate multiple roles and traits into a coherent self-concept (Piaget, 1972; Meeus, 2020). Self-esteem often fluctuates due to increased peer influence, body image concerns, and academic pressures. Successful navigation of Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage promotes a stable sense of self and healthy self-esteem, while identity confusion can contribute to insecurity, low self-worth, and vulnerability to social comparison (Orth & Robins, 2019; Syed & McLean, 2020).

Early Adulthood (18–40 Years)

In early adulthood, self-concept becomes more stable and realistic. Key experiences such as career development, intimate relationships, and the pursuit of independence contribute significantly to self-definition. Self-esteem may increase as individuals gain mastery over personal and professional domains, develop autonomy, and form secure attachments (Robins *et al.*, 2019; Orth *et al.*, 2018).

Middle Adulthood (40–65 Years)

During middle adulthood, self-evaluation increasingly focuses on productivity, generativity, and life achievements. Success in career and parenting, along with contributions to community and society, plays an important role in shaping self-worth. Although self-esteem tends to stabilize during this period, midlife transitions and reassessment of life goals may temporarily influence self-perception and confidence (Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021; Orth & Robins, 2019).

Late Adulthood (65+ Years)

In late adulthood, individuals often reflect on life accomplishments, which significantly impacts self-esteem. According to Erikson's **integrity versus despair** stage, acceptance of one's life fosters dignity and positive self-regard, whereas regret may reduce self-esteem (Erikson, 1968; Côté & Levine, 2021). Physical decline, social loss, and changing societal roles may challenge self-perception; however, wisdom, accumulated life experience, and meaningful relationships can enhance internal self-worth and psychological well-being (Harter, 2018; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2021).

Factors Influencing Development

The development of self-concept and self-esteem is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including family dynamics, peer relationships, academic and occupational experiences, cultural norms, and media exposure.

Family environment plays a foundational role in early development. Parenting style, attachment security, and consistent emotional support contribute significantly to children's emerging self-esteem and self-concept. Children who experience warm, responsive, and authoritative caregiving are more likely to develop a sense of competence, trust, and positive self-worth, whereas neglectful or overly critical parenting may hinder confidence and self-evaluation (Groh *et al.*, 2020; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2021). Early attachment relationships provide the scaffolding for emotional regulation and the perception of self as capable and worthy of love and respect.

Peer relationships become increasingly influential during middle childhood and adolescence. Peer acceptance, friendship quality, and social inclusion strongly affect self-esteem and social self-concept. Positive interactions with peers enhance feelings of belonging and competence, while peer rejection, bullying, or social exclusion can undermine self-worth and contribute to social anxiety and depressive symptoms (Ybrandt, 2019; Bleidorn *et al.*, 2021). Adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer evaluation, making this period critical for identity consolidation.

Academic and occupational achievement also plays a crucial role in shaping self-concept. Feedback from teachers, supervisors, and colleagues provides external validation that influences competence-based self-esteem. Success in academic or occupational tasks fosters confidence and reinforces a sense of mastery, whereas repeated failure or negative



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evaluation may decrease self-esteem and affect motivation (Harter, 2018; Orth et al., 2018). Performance experiences contribute to the development of domain-specific self-concepts, such as academic, social, and professional identities.

Cultural context further shapes self-concept and self-esteem. Collectivist cultures, which emphasize interdependence and relational identity, may foster self-worth based on social harmony, family obligations, and group contributions. In contrast, individualistic cultures prioritize personal achievement, autonomy, and self-expression as central to self-concept and self-esteem (Heine et al., 2021; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Cultural norms influence both the attributes individuals consider important and the ways in which self-esteem is evaluated and expressed.

Finally, media and technology have emerged as powerful factors affecting self-concept, particularly in adolescence. Social media platforms amplify opportunities for social comparison, influencing body image, lifestyle perceptions, and self-worth. Unrealistic portrayals of peers and public figures can heighten dissatisfaction with personal attributes and reduce self-esteem, especially in vulnerable populations (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Seabrook et al., 2016). Conversely, online communities that provide support and positive reinforcement can bolster self-concept and facilitate identity exploration.

Implications for Practice

Understanding the developmental trajectories of self-concept and self-esteem has significant practical applications across educational, familial, counseling, and policy contexts. In educational settings, fostering mastery-based learning, providing constructive feedback, and recognizing individual achievements can enhance students' competence and self-worth. Encouraging positive reinforcement and creating environments that support diverse strengths helps students develop a realistic and adaptive self-concept (Harter, 2018; Marsh & Craven, 2020). In the family context, promoting authoritative parenting characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and clear boundaries supports healthy self-esteem and identity formation. Children raised in supportive households are more likely to develop secure attachments, a stable sense of self, and resilience to challenges encountered in school and peer interactions (Groh et al., 2020; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2021). Within counseling and therapeutic practices, addressing distorted self-beliefs, facilitating identity exploration, and promoting adaptive coping strategies are central to supporting clients across developmental stages. Interventions that help adolescents and adults navigate social comparison, role conflicts, and self-evaluation can mitigate the risks of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Orth & Robins, 2019; Syed & McLean, 2020). At the policy level, designing and supporting youth programs that foster competence, belonging, and opportunities for skill development is essential for promoting positive self-concept and self-esteem. In educational contexts such as the Nigerian system, where academic competition is intense, interventions that balance achievement expectations with social-emotional learning are particularly critical. Policies that encourage mentorship programs, extracurricular engagement, and equitable access to resources contribute to holistic development and psychological well-being (Bleidorn et al., 2021; Heine et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Self-concept and self-esteem are dynamic, interrelated constructs that develop continuously from infancy through late adulthood. Their trajectories are shaped by cognitive maturation, social interaction, familial and peer relationships, cultural norms, and broader life experiences. Theoretical frameworks proposed by Erikson, Piaget, Cooley, and Vygotsky provide essential insights into how individuals construct their sense of identity, interpret social feedback, and develop feelings of self-worth across the lifespan. Promoting positive self-concept and healthy self-esteem at each stage of development has important implications for psychological well-being, resilience, and social functioning. Interventions that emphasize supportive caregiving, constructive feedback, mastery experiences, and adaptive social interactions enhance self-understanding and self-worth. Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors must be taken into account to ensure that strategies for fostering self-esteem are relevant and effective. Ultimately, understanding the developmental pathways of self-concept and self-esteem enables parents, educators, counselors, and policymakers to create environments that support identity formation, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning throughout the lifespan.

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