INTRODUCTION

Who am I? Ask this question of yourself and you will discover that there are many answers, many dimensions of self-description. You are a student, a man or woman, you have a particular career goal, you are a family member, you consider yourself a member of a certain political party, you are a lover, a tennis player, a movie-goer, a musician, a member of a sorority or fraternity, etc. Your self-concept is based in part on the various roles and membership categories that define who you are.

In addition, you have the ability to reflect on these characteristics and to evaluate the self; that is, you are not merely a student but a good student. You are very able athletically. On the other hand, your social skills could use improvement, and you could be more tolerant of your parents. These are all evaluative judgments concerning the worth of the self. Moreover, these self-evaluations often provoke an emotional reaction: I am proud of myself for getting an A. I am ashamed of myself for the way I treated my parents during the holidays.

We take these dimensions of self-description for granted, as adults. Rarely do we reflect on their origins. As infants, however, we had none of these capacities; we had absolutely no concept of self. The ability to appreciate the fact that we were a boy or a girl, a son or a daughter, emerged gradually during the first years of our lives, as did the capacity for evaluating these characteristics. Initially, we had no notion of the worth of the self, no awareness that our propensities could be evaluated. The belief that one is a bad boy, a good sister, a poor reader, or a fast runner must also emerge with development, as does the ability to experience such affective reactions as pride or shame.
In this chapter we trace the origins and development of the self, demonstrating how the self is a concept that is gradually constructed. This process represents a complex interaction between one's developing cognitive capacities and one's socialization experiences. We demonstrate how one's level of cognitive development and one's relationships with parents, peers, and other significant people in one's life allow the child to construct, literally, a portrait of the self. Specifically, we examine the developmental stages of self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-evaluation. How is the self-concept constructed, and what leads the child to hold the self in high esteem, or conversely to conclude that one has little worth as a person?

The Development of Self-Knowledge

Origins in Infancy. The focus of this chapter is the development of self during early and middle childhood. However, we must first briefly review the initial stages in this developmental process. Consider the fact that when the infant comes into the world, he or she not only has no concept of self, but no concept of the significant others in his or her life. The infant does not even have the most rudimentary notion that he or she is separate from the mother. Gradually, the infant advances through a series of stages of self-knowledge and self-awareness (see Harter, 1983).

The beginning awareness of self appears to emerge in the first year with the appreciation that one's body is separate from the mother's, and that one is an active, causal agent in space. Some clever experiments in which infants are placed in front of mirrors have provided this evidence (see Bertenthal & Fischer, 1978; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). The infant playfully waves its arms, bounces, and engages in other rhythmic activities before the mirror, as if it appreciated the fact that "the image moves when I move"; that is, the infant appears to have some rudimentary awareness of the cause and effect relationship between one's own body movements and the moving visual image in the mirror. The infant also comes to realize that the self is an active agent independent of other people who can cause their own movements in space. Thus, movement of the self is separate from the movement of the mother. This is a major advance that occurs toward the end of the first year. However, there are still major limitations. For example, the infant does not yet know what he or she looks like in the sense that the infant cannot recognize its own face.

To become accustomed to one's face requires considerable experience with reflective surfaces such as mirrors. The experiments have demonstrated that it is not until the second year of life that infants can recognize their own facial features (Amsterdam, 1972; Bertenthal & Fischer, 1978; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). In these studies, the experimenter takes some rouge and places a red mark on the infant's nose and then puts the infant in front of a mirror. Prior to about 15 months of age, the infant displays no reaction to the rouge on its nose, whereas from 15 months on the infant will touch its nose or point to the rouge. In touching one's nose, the infant appears to recognize that the image in the mirror is of the self, and that the rouge violates the internalized representation one has of one's face. Facial recognition, therefore, represents a major developmental turning point in self-knowledge.

With increasing cognitive development and the advent of language, other forms of self-knowledge emerge. By the age of 18 months, the toddler can state his or her name and can identify the self in pictures, distinguishing between the self and other toddlers. These developmental acquisitions are quickly followed by the first category labels that come to define the self, in that the 2-year-old can state "I am a girl, not a boy" (gender category) as well as "I am a baby or child, not a grownup" (age categories). However, this is a far cry from the elaborate system of categories and self-descriptions used by adolescents and adults. Thus, we turn next to an examination of the developmental stages of self-knowledge that emerge during early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence.

The Construction of the Self During Early Childhood

If we were to give preschoolers an age-appropriate version of the "Who am I" question, asking them to describe themselves, we would obtain the following type of self-descriptions:

I am a boy, my name is Jason. I live with my mother and father in a big house. I have a kitty that's orange and a brother named Lisa and a television that's in my own room. I'm four years old and I know all my A, B, C's. Listen to me say them, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, L, K, O, M, P, R, Q, X, Z. I can run faster than anyone. I like pizza and I have a nice teacher. I can count up to 100, want to hear me? I love my dog, Skipper. I can climb to the top of the jungle gym. I have brown hair and I go to preschool. I'm really strong, I can lift this chair, watch me!

Major Features. How can we best extract the characteristics of the young child's self-portrait? First and foremost, the preschooler describes concrete, observable behaviors or characteristics (Montemayor & Eisen, 1977; Rosenberg, 1979); that is, anyone could verify these attributes by observing Jason directly. Moreover, they give specific examples rather than generalizations. Thus, we learn about Jason's cat and dog, rather than that he likes animals. Similarly, particular skills are touted (numbers, letters, running, and climbing) rather than more general references to being smart or good at sports. Moreover, these descriptions spill over into actual demonstrations of one's abilities, suggesting that these emerging self-attributes are very directly tied to behavior. They do not represent higher order conceptual categories through which the self is defined. Nor are they likely to be very realistic appraisals of the self (witness Jason's knowledge of the alphabet!).
In addition to the description of behaviors, the young child also expresses preferences (e.g., Jason likes pizza) and identifies possessions (he has a cat and a television in his own room). Specific physical characteristics are also often mentioned, as are other family members. Note two more general features: There is little organization to the description, nor is there any negativity. Rather, we have a rather disjointed account of “all things bright and beautiful” about the self.

Cognitive Limitations. The preschooler’s protrait of the self reflects, to a large degree, certain cognitive limitations of what Piaget (1960, 1963) termed the preoperational or prelogical period of development. At this stage, the child is not yet capable of understanding logical relations; for example, Jason cannot relate his counting ability to his facility with the alphabet in order to come up with the generalized concept of smartness nor can his adeptness on the jungle gym be combined with observations of his strength in order to arrive at a generalization concerning his physical abilities. The child can only make reference to a variety of very specific behaviors or characteristics rather than higher order concepts about the self.

Furthermore, the positivity observed in all likelihood reflects an inflated sense of one’s abilities because the young child does not have the cognitive ability to test or logically deduce whether these judgments are realistic. In fact, findings clearly demonstrate that the young child is very inaccurate in judging his or her abilities, if one compares the child’s self-perceptions to more objective standards such as teachers’ ratings (Harter & Pike, 1984). There we find that with skills such as running, counting, and knowing one’s letters and colors, the child typically evaluates the self as more skillful than does the teacher. This results from the fact that most young children confuse the wish to be competent with reality, and as a result their self-judgments represent overestimations of their true abilities. It is important to note, however, that these distortions are due to the cognitive limitations of this period. The child is not willfully misrepresenting his or her competencies but is simply unable to realistically or logically test the postulates in his or her self-theory. Thus, the child cannot differentiate one’s real from one’s ideal self-image.

The rather disjointed nature of Jason’s narrative results from the fact that the young child does not yet have the ability to organize logically these self-descriptions into any coherent picture of the self. Moreover, if one were to obtain a different description from the same child, at another point in time, it might well be somewhat inconsistent with the first self-description. The child, however, is unable to recognize such contradictions and is thus unconcerned about the lack of logical consistency.

We can relate this latter point to Piaget’s observations with regard to the concept of conservation. In the classic water beaker experiment, where water is poured from a short, wide beaker into a tall, thin beaker, the preoperational child will assert that the quantity of liquid has changed. There is now more water in the tall beaker because it is higher; that is, the amount of water is not conserved in the mind of the young child. Similarly, when transformations occur in the life of the child at this age, one’s attributes may well change, and we observe lack of conservation of self. This phenomenon has been most dramatically demonstrated by Kohlberg (1966), who found that gender constancy, the appreciation that one’s gender does not change, is not achieved until the ages of 5 to 7. Thus, whereas preschoolers may readily provide an account of their attributes, these descriptions do not necessarily represent a stable conceptualization of the self. (See Table 3.1 where the various features of the young child’s self-description are summarized.)

Self-Descriptions in Middle Childhood

Contrast the preschooler’s self-description with that of a child in the middle to late elementary school grades, Jason’s sister, Lisa:

I’m in the fifth grade this year at Rockland Elementary School. I’m pretty popular. That’s because I’m nice and helpful, the other girls in my class say that I am. I have two girlfriends who are really close friends, and I’m good at keeping their secrets. Most of the boys are pretty yukky. My brother Jason is younger and I don’t feel that way about him, tho’ sometimes he gets on my nerves too. But I control my temper most of the time and don’t get too angry and I’d be ashamed of myself if I got really mad at him. I’ve always been smart at school, ever since the first grade and I’m proud of myself for that. This year I’m doing really well in reading, social studies, and science, better than the other kids. But some of them do better than me in math, like on tests where sometimes I goof up. When that happens, I feel really dumb, but usually not for long. I don’t worry about it that much, and most of the time I feel like I’m smart. I’m not very good at sports, like I don’t do well at baseball, soccer, or gymnastics. I don’t really see why they even have sports in school since they just aren’t that important. I’d like to be an actress when I grow up but nobody thinks I am pretty enough. Jennifer, my older sister is really really pretty, but I’m smarter than she is. I know I would make a good teacher, that’s what my friends say and that’s what I’ll probably be. Mostly I am just me. Some things about me might change when I get older but alot of them will probably stay the same. I’m a pretty OK person.

Major Features. Self-descriptions at this age are different from those of younger children on a number of dimensions (see Table 3.1). One major difference is the emergence of trait labels such as popular, helpful, smart, and references to athletic ability and physical attractiveness. The child at this age combines a number of specific behaviors into a more generalized concept about the self. Moreover, children often indicate the process through which they arrive at such a generalization. For example, Lisa infers smartness from her perfor-
TABLE 3.1
Features of Self-Description to Emerge at Three Developmental Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Childhood</th>
<th>Middle Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific examples of observable physical characteristics, behaviors, abilities, preferences, possessions.</td>
<td>Trait labels reflecting the ability to integrate behaviors into generalized concepts about the self.</td>
<td>Abstractions about the self involving psychological constructs, due to ability to integrate traits into higher order generalizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Self-attributes logically organized, integrated within domains which are differentiated from one another.</td>
<td>Ability to construct a formal theory of the self in which all attributes across and within role domains are integrated and should be internally consistent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stability, Interest</strong></td>
<td>Recognition of, interest in, continuity and stability of self-attributes over time.</td>
<td>Intrapsychic conflict and confusion over contradictions and instability within the self, concern with creation of an integrated identity. Intense preoccupation with the self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bases, Criteria</strong></td>
<td>Use of social comparison due to ability to simultaneously observe and evaluate the self in relation to others in one’s reference group.</td>
<td>Intense focus on the opinions which significant others hold of the self, particularly opinions of peers and close friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ability to Evaluate</strong></td>
<td>Aware that others are critically evaluating the self; adopts these attitudes and standards in forming the looking-glass self.</td>
<td>Creation of imaginary audience which is critically evaluating the self. Blurs the distinction between this evaluation and self-criticism.</td>
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TABLE 3.1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Childhood</th>
<th>Middle Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valence, Accuracy</td>
<td>Self-statements extremely positive, inflated sense of self. Inaccuracies due to confusion between the ideal and the real self.</td>
<td>More accurate appraisal of self due to ability to use social comparison and to realistically observe the self. Both positive and negative self-evaluation.</td>
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In providing the behavioral evidence for these trait labels, we find a much more coherent self-portrait than we observed in young children. Lisa’s account is logically organized around particular themes that represent the different domains relevant to her self-definition, and the narrative flows smoothly from one topic to the next.

We also see the effect of other’s opinion on Lisa’s self-evaluation. She is concerned about what others think about her sociability, her attractiveness, and her potential as a good teacher. The incorporation of these opinions into her own self-description represents an example of what Cooley (1902) termed the looking-glass self; that is, the significant others in one’s life become social mirrors, as it were, and one gazes into these mirrors in order to determine others’ opinions of oneself. One then adopts this opinion in forming one’s self-definition. Lisa is particularly sensitive to the opinion of her peers, whereas a few years earlier, parental opinion was more salient (Rosenberg, 1979).

Another feature of self-description at this stage is the use of social comparison as a means of determining the competence or adequacy of the self. Lisa’s judgment of her academic competence is based on a comparison of her performance with that of her classmates, whereas her opinion of her attractiveness involves a comparison with her older sister. In making these comparisons, Lisa arrives at a more balanced self-portrait than her younger brother Jason. Thus, in the domain of performance in specific school subjects. Her poor athletic ability is based on her performance across several different sports. Her popularity and social acceptance are based on the fact that she is nice, helpful, and keeps secrets. Lisa’s self-description is typical of children moving into late childhood, in that the trait labels applied to the self become increasingly interpersonal (Rosenberg, 1979); that is, one’s relationship to others, particularly peers and close friends, becomes more salient dimensions of the self.
of academics she concludes that she is reasonably competent, whereas her judgment is more negative with regard to her appearance. Sports is another arena where she feels relatively incompetent, indicating that she can make distinctions between the different domains of relevance to the self. It is also likely that her judgments are reasonably accurate, in contrast to the self-descriptions of her younger brother.

Although one finds mention of negative self-attributes at this age level, one also observes the emergence of mechanisms through which the potentially damaging impact to the self can be reduced. For example, although Lisa admits her lack of ability in sports, she also considers this domain to be relatively unimportant. Her anticipated career as a teacher rather than an actress also represents an attempt to highlight her strengths. In a subsequent section on self-worth, we return to this issue of the mechanisms that children come to develop in order to protect and enhance the self.

On another point, we find the introduction of emotion concepts as self-descriptors during middle and later childhood. In Lisa’s account, we find references to feeling proud, not that worried, and not too angry. The ability to control one’s emotions and related behavior, particularly anger, becomes an important dimension of self-evaluation during this period. The emergence of self-control as a salient criterion for evaluating one’s worth as a person has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Minton, 1981; Rosenberg, 1979). It is of interest that whereas very young children obviously experience a range of emotions, often very intensely, neither the expression nor the control of these emotions finds its way into the self-descriptions at younger age levels; that is, they are not yet defining characteristics of the self.

Furthermore, we not only find emotion concepts in Lisa’s self-description, but we observe the emergence of self-affects, namely emotions directed toward the self. For example, Lisa would be ashamed of herself if she lost her temper. She is proud of herself because she does well at school. The ability to experience these emotions directed toward the self does not emerge until middle childhood (Harter, 1983). The very young child may experience pride and shame, if one’s parents express the fact that they are proud of the child’s accomplishments or ashamed of the child’s transgressions. It is not until approximately third grade, however, that children can, in the absence of parental observations of their behavior, feel proud or ashamed of themselves. Moreover, not only does the child develop the ability to experience these self-affects, but they find their way into one’s self-descriptions.

Self-descriptions in middle childhood also reflect an interest in the continuity of the self over time. Lisa’s references to her scholastic competence imply stability with the past (she notes that she has done well in school since first grade) as well as some projection into the future. She gives some thought to the general issue of whether she will change or stay the same, concluding that she will probably be a teacher. During this period, children begin to think about the issue of trait stability or the constancy of attributes that define the self (Dweck & Elliot, 1983; Guardo & Bohan, 1971; Ruble, in press), an issue that was not of interest or concern when they were younger.

**Underlying Cognitive Abilities During Middle Childhood.** With these various features in mind, how can such developmental shifts in self-description be explained in terms of the emerging cognitive abilities during middle childhood? Cognitive-developmental theory (Fischer, 1980; Piaget, 1960, 1963) alerts us to many relevant skills that emerge during the period of concrete operations. At this particular stage, beginning at approximately the age of 6, the child is now able to begin to think logically at least with regard to the concrete, observable elements of one’s world, including the behaviors or the self. The child can classify events into categories and can begin to develop conceptual hierarchies within these categories. For example, the category of animals can be divided into wild and domestic, and within each of these subcategories the child can identify any number of exemplars, e.g., lions, tigers, elephants, and bears (wild animals) versus dogs, cats, cows, and horses (domestic animals).

Thus, a major cognitive advance in middle childhood results from newfound abilities at conceptual integration. Moreover, the child’s ability to classify and hierarchize concepts logically extends to attempts at self-definition. In particular, it provides the skills whereby particular behaviors can be organized and categorized into trait labels. We observed earlier that the young child is conceptually ill-equipped to relate one self-descriptor to another. Thus, Jason could not observe the links between potentially related characteristics such as his strength and his ability to climb the jungle gym. In contrast, Lisa is able to integrate the observations of her successes across various school subjects in order to arrive at a trait label or conceptual generalization about her school performance, namely that she is smart.

Lisa employs a similar process within the domain of athletics, integrating the observations of her performance at several sports, which lead to the generalized conclusion that she is not good at sports. What has been emphasized by cognitive-developmental theorists in the tradition of Piaget is that not only do these new conceptual abilities emerge, but that the child has a penchant for utilizing these new cognitive structures. Thus, the child is eager to organize, classify, and hierarchize the elements of his or her world, as well as attributes of the self. This organizational penchant also accounts for the greater coherence observed in the self-descriptions of children in middle childhood.

The ability to relate one concept to another, to compare two elements simultaneously, is also a prerequisite to both an interest in the continuity of the self and the use of social comparison information. With regard to the continuity of the self, the child is now able to compare the self in the present with the self in the past, holding these aspects in mind simultaneously. To the extent that one attempts to focus on similarities, to integrate these self-observations, one comes to the conclusion that one’s attributes are conserved over time.

The basic ability to compare different elements or features simultaneously is
also necessary in order to appreciate the implications that social comparison has for the evaluation of the self. The child must be able to compare simultaneously the characteristics of another child to the attributes of the self, in order to detect differences or similarities. These comparisons are likely to take on greater meaning, against a backdrop of trait labels that the child may well view as relatively stable (Ruble, in press). Through this type of analysis we come to see how changes in one’s concept of self are very intimately related to changes in the child’s cognitive abilities.

Self-Descriptions During Adolescence

Having provided an analysis of the self-descriptions of early and middle childhood, we now turn to a cameo of the self provided by the adolescent, in the words of Jennifer, the 15-year-old sister of Jason and Lisa.

I’m pretty complicated, actually. Most people don’t understand me, especially my parents! I’m sensitive, moody, affectionate, and sometimes self-conscious. It depends on who I am with. When I’m with my friends, mostly my best friends that is, I’m sensitive and understanding. But sometimes I can also be extremely uncaring and selfish. At home, with my parents I’m affectionate, but I can also get very moody; sometimes I get really depressed and go the the opposite extreme. I’m usually pretty tolerant of my little brother and sister. But I’m a different person on a date. I’m outgoing and I can be a lot of fun. There’s this one guy I went out with, tho’, and I know he was trying to analyze me! When that happens I just change on the spot! I get self-conscious and nervous and then I become a total introvert. I don’t know what to say or how to act. It really bugs me too. I mean the real me is fun-loving so why do I have to act so weird? I also don’t really understand why I treat my friends the way I do. I’m a naturally sensitive person and I care about their feelings, but sometimes I say really nasty things to them. I’m not a horrible person, I know that, but then how can I say horrible things that I don’t really mean? Sometimes I feel pretty confused and mixed up about it. Talking to my best girl friends, Tammy and Sharon, helps. We talk on the phone for hours. They understand me better than anyone else, and they care about me. You probably don’t understand what I’m trying to say. What I mean is that I can be pretty obnoxious with my friends sometimes, but that’s not who I really am as a person. That’s not part of my personality, its just the way I act sometimes, and its not that important, actually, so I probably shouldn’t even have mentioned it. There are things that are much more important, for example, I think I am good-looking. Not exactly Brooke Shields, understand, but I’m really attractive compared to the other girls in my school. My little sister Lisa tells me I’m pretty too, but she really bugs me because there are days when I look at myself in the mirror and think I look absolutely, totally, atrocious, I’m the ugliest person in the entire world! She tries to talk me out of it, but what does she know about looks, she’s only 10! My mother is the same way. She’ll say “you look lovely, dear” when I really look like a total zero! But then there are days when I look great, and my mom says “Are you going out with your hair like that?” I hate to go to school on days like that, I get really depressed. Besides, I’m pretty bored at school anyway. Nothing they teach is relevant to anything in life! I think of myself as an inquisitive person but there’s nothing about school subjects to be curious about. So I’m a pretty mediocre student, I just do what I have to in order to get by, but it doesn’t bother me that much, its just not that important. I know everyone in class is looking at me thinking I’m really dumb, but I only care about what my friends think. Besides I’m going to be an airline stewardess, anyway. Well probably. So are my best friends, Tammy and Sharon, we’re all going to airline school together after we graduate, if we graduate. I’m confused about what to do. Subconsciously I want to quit, but then the real me knows I should stay in school for my own good. I really don’t know. There are days when I wish I could just become immune to myself!

Major Features and Cognitive Underpinnings. How can we summarize the primary features of self-description in adolescence, and how are these features dependent, in part, on cognitive-developmental change during this period? A major characteristic of adolescent self-description is the use of abstract concepts in making reference to the self. For example, Jennifer refers to herself as sensitive, moody, self-conscious, affectionate, obnoxious, attractive, tolerant, a total introvert, etc. As Rosenberg (1979) has pointed out, the adolescent describes his or her psychological interior, characteristics that describe the inner world of one’s feelings, thoughts, and personality.

These abstractions represent a cognitive advance over the preadolescent who could only combine particular behaviors into trait labels. The adolescent, at a new stage of cognitive development, can now integrate one’s tendencies to be both depressed and fun loving into the abstraction “moody.” To consider oneself “sensitive” one must combine such traits as friendly, helpful, caring, and good listener. This new level of integrative abilities comes about with the entrance into Piaget’s period of formal operations. The adolescent is now able to apply one’s logical operations to constructs about the self that are unobservable and hypothetical, which are abstract generalizations about the self; that is, these self attributes require much more inference about one’s latent characteristics than do the self-descriptions of the younger child.

At the same time that the adolescent is integrating concepts about the self in the form of such abstractions, there is also differentiation within the self based on the various roles that one must adopt. Thus, Jennifer presents one set of self-abstractions in relationship to her family, whereas the self is quite different with friends. Yet another set of characteristics surfaces in her self-description within romantic relationships. Thus, one possesses different selves depending on the particular role or context.

Contradictions Within the Self. These different selves represent an underlying cognitive advance in the form of ability to differentiate; yet they also pose...
what William James (1892) initially entitled the "conflict of the different Me's"; that is, one may well recognize contradictions within the self. For example, Jennifer is understanding with her friends, but moody with her family. In addition, she experiences conflict within the various roles she plays. She is outgoing on a date and then becomes a total introvert. She is caring with her friends but then says horrible things to them. She is affectionate with her parents but then gets depressed and goes to the opposite extreme.

The self-descriptions of the adolescent are not stable, therefore, but vacillate from the display of a given attribute to its opposite. In these observations, we see a more advanced form of lack of conservation of self that typically accompanies movement to a new stage of cognitive development. Furthermore, these contradictions within the self become quite bothersome to the adolescent. In fact, it has been demonstrated that adolescents perceive these inconsistencies as clashes within one's personality, clashes that are a major source of distress and confusion (Harter, 1986; Monsour, 1985); that is, they cause considerable intrapsychic conflict. Such conflict becomes particularly apparent at about the age of 15.

The structure of Jennifer's self-portrait, including the inconsistencies within her personality that cause such conflict, is depicted in Fig. 3.1. This particular self-portrait is adapted from our findings with ninth graders. We ask subjects to first make lists of self-attributes in four different roles or contexts: how they are with their friends, with their family, at school, and in romantic relationships. They then organize these attributes into clusters and also indicate which are the most important, less important, and the least important aspects of their personality. Finally, they are asked to indicate whether any of these attributes are clashing, fighting, or at war with each other within their personality. The conflicts are represented by the double-headed arrows in the portrait depicted in Fig. 3.1.

As Jennifer's self-picture reveals, her attributes are organized around the four roles we inquired about, such that there are four clusters of self-descriptions according to how she sees herself with friends, with family, at school, and in romantic relationships. This figure also depicts the various conflicts she is experiencing, most of which are within each of the roles depicted. It is interesting that we do not find evidence for much conflict prior to the ninth grade. This raises the question of why it does not emerge until middle adolescence.

The tendency for contradictions within the self to be observed and to cause conflict is in large part based on new cognitive abilities now possessed in middle adolescence. One is now capable of constructing a theory of the self, which involves the integration of the multiple concepts of the self; that is, one can relate one abstraction about the self to another (Fischer, 1980). Note that a major criterion for any good theory, be it a theory in science or a theory about the self, is that all the postulates of the theory be internally consistent (Epstein, 1973). However, given the role experimentation, the physiological changes, new social demands, and mood swings of adolescence, one's self-expression is often not consistent, either across roles or within roles. Yet the adolescent has the cognitive ability to detect these inconsistencies as one attempts to construct a general theory of one's personality, an integrated identity. The realization of these contradictions, therefore, creates considerable conflict within the self-system, conflict that leads to a sense of confusion and psychological distress. In Jennifer's account, for example, we see her agonizing over these inconsistencies, particularly those that occur within a particular role or interpersonal context.

Adolescent Preoccupation with the Self. The penchant for constructing an entire portrait of the self in which the different characteristics of the self are integrated helps to explain why the adolescent appears so preoccupied with his or her own personality. The canvas for such a portrait is overwhelmingly large, the
elements to integrate are numerous, and therefore the task becomes all consuming. Unlike the younger children, whose descriptions were relatively brief and direct, the lengthy and often tortured self-descriptions provided by Jennifer convey the intensity of these processes during adolescence.

This introspectiveness, this intense preoccupation with the self, is not conducted in isolation. Rather, the adolescent turns to one’s friends for support and self-clarification. Lisa turns to her girlfriends, to help her sort things out. It is their opinion of her that is most critical to her emerging self-definition. In so doing, we see an intensification of the looking-glass self phenomenon that began in middle childhood. As Rosenberg (1979) has pointed out, one’s best friends become the major source of reflected appraisals; they become the social mirror into which the adolescent anxiously stares.

The self-consciousness and preoccupation with a theory of self represents one form of what Elkind (1967) has termed adolescent egocentrism. As Elkind observed, the adolescent often concludes that others are as preoccupied with his or her appearance as he or she. Thus, others are analyzing or thinking about the self, as in Jennifer’s account of her date, or her classmates thinking she was dumb. The construction of this imaginary audience, to use Elkind’s label, reflects the convergence of intense self-consciousness, the heightened importance of the looking-glass self, and some difficulty in differentiating one’s own thoughts and preoccupations from those of others.

There is another element of adolescent egocentrism that Elkind identifies as the personal fable. The adolescent tends to feel that one’s own experiences are so unique and novel that no one else could possibly appreciate them, particularly one’s parents and those outside one’s circle of close friends. In Jennifer’s self-description we learn that neither her parents nor her younger sister really understand her. Neither does the interviewer, a neutral adult who was merely recording her self-descriptions!

Mechanisms to Protect the Self. Despite the confusion and sense of conflict provoked by these introspective attempts to fathom the self, we see evidence of mechanisms designed to protect and enhance the self. It is most evident in Jennifer’s descriptions of those contradictions in herself that occurred within a particular interpersonal role. She laments the fact that she sometimes says nasty things to her friends even though she is not a horrible person. Yet in so doing, she sees her real self as naturally sensitive and caring, not a horrible person. Rather, from time to time negative behaviors may inexplicably be displayed, but these are not at the core of her personality. In fact, she denies their importance. In another sphere, she sees herself as basically inquisitive. She admits she is bored and a mediocre student in school but denies the importance of her behavior in this context.

This tendency to deny the importance of one’s negative characteristics has been systematically documented in our own research (Harter, 1986; Monsour, 1985). As Fig. 3.1 indicates, when we have adolescents sort their various self-descriptive labels into those that are at the center of their personality, those that are less important, and those that are the least important, there is a definite pattern. Adolescents very consistently identify positive attributes as the core constructs in their self-portrait, whereas negative attributes are relegated to the periphery of one’s personality. For example, in Jennifer’s depiction, attributes such as attractive, fun loving, sensitive, affectionate, and inquisitive are located at the center of the self. In contrast, the most negative self-descriptions, e.g., ugly, mediocre, depressed, selfish, nervous, are placed in the outer ring, as the least important attributes of the self. By depicting one’s personality in this manner, the adolescent is able to maintain a reasonably positive self-image, touting one’s admirable qualities as central to the self. The importance of behaviors that are less than admirable is minimized and they are perceived as foreign to one’s true self.

This analysis highlights the fact that not only does the nature of self-description change dramatically over the course of development, but that these changes are very dependent on the emergence of new cognitive abilities. Generally, in treatments of cognitive development, advances to new levels of thinking are discussed in terms of their positive implications. We can also see from our analysis, however, that the emergence of a higher level of cognitive development also brings with it certain vulnerabilities for the self. The child moving into the period of concrete operations, with the newfound capacity for social comparison, must now run the risk of realizing that one may not be as smart or as athletic or as attractive as others within one’s reference group (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The adolescent, moving solidly into the period of formal operations, must now run the risk of realizing that there are serious contradictions within the self-theory that one is trying so valiantly to construct. We need to appreciate the fact that developmental strides bring with them new organizational capacities that directly impact the self. However, they also present new challenges and stresses with which the individual must cope.

Developmental Stages in Self-Awareness

The previous sections have documented age differences in the nature of children’s self-description, focusing primarily on the cognitive-developmental factors responsible for these changes. However, the child obviously does not develop in a vacuum. The significant others in one’s life have a major impact on one’s evolving self-image. These socializing influences operate in conjunction with cognitive-developmental change.

Consider the concept of the looking-glass self. We noted earlier that our sense of self is in part determined by the opinions that we feel others hold about us. We incorporate those perceptions into our self-image. However, the very ability to recognize that others are evaluating the self must develop; it is not present in the
young child. This recognition is a prerequisite to self-awareness. From two sources, the descriptive accounts of development provided by Gesell and Ilg (1946) and the theorizing of Selman (1980), we can piece together a picture of the stages of self-awareness. As depicted in Fig. 3.2, we first need to distinguish between two separate aspects of the self and other. One can be an observer but one can also be observed.

At the first stage, which occurs at approximately age 5, the child can observe others, but does not realize that others can observe the self. Thus, the 5-year old seems preoccupied with evaluating the conduct and correctness of one’s friends’ or classmates’ behavior, frequently criticizing them on this account. However, the very young child is unable to recognize that friends are also observing him or her in this same light, nor can the young child observe or critically evaluate the self directly.

At the second stage, the child comes to appreciate the fact that others are observing and evaluating the self. Moreover, as Gesell and Ilg note, children become concerned about what others might think of them and are careful not to expose themselves to criticism. They worry about making mistakes and cringe when they are laughed at or made fun of. This second stage, therefore, sets the stage for the looking-glass self in that the child becomes aware that others are appraising the self. The limitation of this stage, however, can be seen in the fact that the child cannot critically observe the self directly.

At the third stage, which emerges around the age of 8, the child can begin to incorporate the observations of others into one’s own self-perceptions and can directly evaluate the self. Children become interested in evaluating their own performance, based on the standards that other people have for the self. During this period, they internalize these expectations into self-standards. In so doing, they also develop the capacity for self-criticism, if they feel that they fail to meet these standards.

This third stage also marks the emergence of the ability to compare oneself to others. The child can now simultaneously observe both self and other, and this ability to engage in social comparison provides a major index of the self’s adequacy. As we noted earlier, the very young child’s self-descriptions often represent quite an unrealistic inflation of their competencies, in part because they do not yet have the ability to compare their performance to that of others. Thus, the ability to observe, evaluate, and criticize the self must develop through a series of stages that begin with an awareness that others are evaluating the self and with the ability to compare oneself to one’s social reference group.

A Domain-Specific Approach to Self-Evaluation

As we have seen in the preceding sections, one’s self-portrait is not merely a description of one’s attributes, but it contains critical evaluations of judgments about the adequacy of the self. This evaluative component forms the basis for what many have labelled one’s self-esteem or self-image. Do we hold the self in high regard, or do we have a negative opinion of the self? From the types of spontaneous self-descriptions presented, we might be able to infer each child’s self-esteem. Psychologists, however, have been interested in obtaining a more precise index of the level of a child’s regard for the self. Thus, there have been attempts to quantify self-esteem.

Until recently, theorists and investigators treated self-esteem as a general judgment about the self that could be represented by a single score (Coopersmith, 1967; Piers & Harris, 1969). Questionnaires designed to assess self-esteem typically included items that tapped the children’s evaluation of their performance across numerous areas of their life. Self-evaluative judgments about school performance, interactions with family members, peer relationships, emotional reactivity, conduct, appearance, and so forth were elicited by giving the following types of true-false questions: I do well at school, My family understands me, I am easy to like, I hardly ever get upset, I usually behave myself, I have a nice appearance. The evaluative responses to such an aggregate of items (which
Perception Profile for the child’s self-esteem (see Harter, 1982, 1983, 1986). The single score typically number from 40 to 60) are then summed into a total score which represents the level of one’s self-esteem from extremely positive (if the subject responds affirmatively to most or all items) to extremely negative (if the subject indicates that these statements are false, that is, they do not characterize the self).

More recently, theorists and investigators of the self have questioned whether this framework and method of assessment provides a sensitive enough appraisal of the child’s self-esteem (see Harter, 1982, 1983, 1986). The single score approach implies that one’s sense of esteem is at the same level across all areas of one’s life. However, the child may well evaluate the self differently depending upon the particular domain in question. For example, a child may feel very competent at schoolwork, somewhat less adequate in the realm of peer relationships, and relatively incompetent in the domain of athletics. The single-score approach, however, would mask these differences in self-evaluation. If one merely summed scores across these different domains, one would falsely conclude that the child’s self-esteem was neither high nor low, but average in all areas.

As an alternative to the single-score approach, a number of theorists have put forth domain-specific models in which one assesses each domain separately (see Harter, 1983, 1986). This domain-specific approach provides a profile of scores that depict differences in the child’s sense of adequacy across the various domains identified by the investigator. That is, the child’s responses to a questionnaire lead to separate scores for each domain.

We have adopted such a domain-specific approach in our own work (see Harter, 1982; 1983; 1985a; 1985b; 1986). Our Self-Perception Profile for Children (1985b) taps five specific domains in the lives of children age 8 and older. These are:

1. **Scholastic Competence**: How competent, smart, the child feels with regard to schoolwork.
2. **Athletic Competence**: How competent the child feels at sports and games requiring physical skill, athletic ability.
3. **Social Acceptance**: How popular or socially accepted the child feels in social interactions with peers.
4. **Behavioral Conduct**: How adequate the child feels with regard to behaving the way one is supposed to.
5. **Physical Appearance**: How good looking the child feels, how much one likes such physical characteristics as height, weight, face, hair.

The Issue of Question Format. Typically, on earlier self-esteem measures, a two-choice response format has been employed where the child indicates whether a statement (e.g., I have a lot of friends) is true or false for the self. Investigators have found, however, that this type of format does not provide a broad enough range of options. As a result, when forced with only two choices, children often give the socially desirable response, that is, they typically endorse the positive choice (see Harter, 1982). Thus, their responses may not provide an accurate self-evaluation.

On our Self-Perception Profile for Children, we have sought to avoid this problem by devising an alternative question format. The child is presented with items in the form depicted in Table 3.2 where there is a sample item for each domain. The child’s task is to first decide whether he or she is more like the kids described in the first half of the statement on the left, or more like the kids described in the second half of the statement on the right. Once having made this decision, the child next indicates whether the half of the statement that best characterizes the self is only Sort of True or Really True. Thus, the child checks one of the four boxes for each item.

Items are scored according to a 4-point scale. If children pick the statement describing the mark competent or adequate kids and indicate that this is Very True for the self, they receive a score of 4. If the check that this statement is only Sort of True for them, they receive a score of 3. If they endorse the side of the statement depicting less competent kids and indicate that this description is just

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Really True for me</th>
<th>Sort of True for me</th>
<th>BUT</th>
<th>Other kids almost always can figure out the answers.</th>
<th>Sort of True for me</th>
<th>BUT</th>
<th>Other kids can figure out the answers.</th>
<th>Really True for me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some kids have trouble figuring out the answers in school</td>
<td>3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Others don’t feel that they are very good when it comes to sports.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some kids do very well at all kinds of sports</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other kids are not very popular.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>BUT</td>
<td>Some kids are popular with others their age</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other kids are not very popular.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>BUT</td>
<td>Some kids usually get in trouble because of things they do</td>
<td>3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other kids usually don’t do things that get them in trouble.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>BUT</td>
<td>Some kids wish their physical appearance was different</td>
<td>3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other kids like their physical appearance the way it is.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>BUT</td>
<td>Some kids like the kind of person they are</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other kids often wish they were someone else.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sort of True for Me, they receive a score of 2. If they indicate that the less competent description is Really True for the self, they receive a score of 1.

These scores are not printed on the actual form that the child fills out. They are presented in the table merely to illustrate the scoring procedure. Also note that half the items begin with a statement describing the more competent or adequate kids, whereas the other half begin with a statement describing less competent kids. This is done so that we know that child respondents are actually reading the items and tracking their content. The actual form of the scale that the child fills out has six items for each domain. The average of the six scores for each separate domain is calculated, leading to a profile of scores across these domains.

We have found this question format to be very effective in reducing children’s tendency to give the socially desirable response, for several reasons. Children do not have to endorse or deny bold “I” statements about the self. Rather, our items present descriptions of how existing types of kids feel about themselves, and we invite the child respondent to identify with one group; that is, they legitimize the child’s choice. For the child who is not very competent, such an item conveys the fact that lots of kids in the real world feel the same way, and thus the items allow the child to admit that he or she is a member of this existing group.

In addition, we have found that the option of checking either Sort of True for Me or Really True for Me allows the child a greater range of responses than the typical two-choice format. For example, a child who questions his competency at schoolwork is more likely to check that side of the statement if it is possible to indicate that this is only sort of true. In general, therefore, we feel that we are obtaining a reasonably accurate portrayal of most children’s sense of adequacy in these domains.

With younger children the task of obtaining an accurate portrayal of one’s competencies is somewhat more difficult. As we pointed out in our discussion of Jason’s self-description, the young child is likely to inflate his sense of competence. We can directly assess this feature of young children’s judgments, however, by employing a pictorial version that shares certain features with the questionnaire (Harter & Pike, 1984). Each plate contains two pictures, one depicting a child who is competent (e.g., gets stars on his school papers) and one depicting a child who is not very competent (e.g., does not get stars on his papers). The subject picks which child is most like him and then indicates whether this is just a little like the self (points to a small circle underneath) or alot like the self (points to a large circle).

Sample Self-Perception Profiles. Before presenting some sample profiles of actual children from our studies, it is important to point out that there are any number of profiles that children can display. In this chapter we are only able to present a few. Think about yourself, for example, as a fifth grader. How would you reconstruct your remembrance of how you felt about yourself? What would have been your sense of adequacy across these domains? What would your unique profile have looked like?

In Fig. 3.3, we present the profiles of six different children who are in the late elementary grades. What should be noted first is that children can and do make distinctions among the different areas of their lives. They do not feel equally adequate in all domains. (If they did, they would have approximately the same subscale score in every area.) For the moment we are concentrating on the specific domain scores. We deal with the self-worth score in a subsequent section.

Consider Child A. This particular child feels very good about her scholastic performance, although this is in sharp contrast to her opinion of her athletic ability. Socially, this child feels reasonably well accepted by her peers. In addition, she considers herself to be well behaved. Her feelings about her appearance, however, are only average. This particular profile is very much like what we would expect from a child like Lisa.

Child B has a very different configuration of subscale scores across these domains. This is a boy who feels very incompetent when it comes to schoolwork. However, he feels very competent athletically and is well received by his peers. He feels that his behavioral conduct is less commendable. In contrast, he thinks he is relatively good looking.

Child A and Child B both represent children whose scores vary markedly across domains. There are other children whose profiles do not display such dramatic differences, although they make some distinction among domains. Child C represents a child who feels relatively competent in almost all domains. Whereas there are some dips in this profile with regard to athletic competence and appearance, they are not nearly as dramatic as those shown by Child A. Child D is an example of an individual who feels relatively inadequate across all domains. Nevertheless, this boy’s profile is not entirely flat. He feels slightly better about himself in some domains, for example, in scholastic competence and conduct, than in others.

Child E and Child F represent two children, neither of whom feel very good about themselves scholastically or athletically. They feel much better about their social acceptance, conduct, and physical appearance. In fact, their profiles are quite similar to each other across these specific domains. Yet why, then, are they so different with regard to the self-worth score that is also presented? How is this to be explained? In order to understand this difference, we must next turn to a discussion of what is meant by self-worth.

Children’s Perceptions of Their Global Self-Worth

There is ample evidence that most children, age 8 and older, evaluate their performance differently in the various areas of their lives. Thus, if we were to combine these subscale scores into a single score, we would mask or obscure important self-evaluative distinctions that children clearly make. If we wish to
truly understand a given child, we must take these context-specific judgments into account.

We also now know that beginning at about the third grade, children are able to make a global judgment about their overall worth as a person (Harter, 1982, 1985a,b, 1986; Rosenberg, 1979). (Prior to age 8, children are not capable of constructing a global concept of themselves as a person that can be evaluated in terms of overall worth.) Among older children this judgment is tapped by items that ask how much one likes oneself as a person, likes the way one is in general, is pleased with oneself, likes the way one is leading one's life, etc. A sample from the Self-Perception Profile for Children would be:

There are six of these items that form the global self-worth subscale. It is important to appreciate the fact that global self-worth is measured directly and independently of the specific domains we have discussed; that is, it has its own unique set of items that inquire into one's overall judgment about how much one likes oneself as a person. (It is not a combination of domain-specific items.)

The concept of global self-worth has its historical roots in the writings of William James (1892) and Charles H. Cooley (1902). These scholars of the self both observed that we carry around an overall feeling about ourselves, about our worth as a human being. We make a global judgment that somehow transcends the sum of our specific self-evaluations. Many decades later, certain psychologists have documented the fact that global feelings of self-worth can be reliably measured in adults and adolescents (Rosenberg, 1979) as well as in older elementary, and middle schoolchildren (Harter, 1985a, 1985b, 1986). However, an intriguing question remains. What determines the level of one's global self-worth; why do some children have a very positive overall evaluation of the self, whereas other children have a very negative opinion of their overall worth?

The Determinants of Global Self-Worth

Both Cooley and James speculated on the antecedents of self-worth, although their formulations were quite different from each other. We have already encountered Cooley's basic formulation as represented by this concept of the looking-glass self. For Cooley, the self represented the internalized opinions that we perceive others to hold about us. Acceptance and positive regard from others, therefore, was an important source of one's own sense of worth as a person. For James, the evaluation of one's competence, one's achievements, was a primary determinant of self-worth. More specifically, he postulated that displays of com-

![Sample self-perception profiles from six children.](image-url)
petence in those areas where it was important to be successful were the most critical to one's overall self-esteem. We turn to each of these formulations in more detail and examine their applicability to children, ages 8 and older, who possess a sense of global self-worth.

Acceptance and Regard from Others. We first introduced Cooley's notion of the looking-glass self in relation to the specific judgments encountered within the self-descriptions of our prototypical children. Recall that 10-year-old Lisa was concerned about what her friends thought about her appearance and her school competence. However, this formulation not only applies to domain-specific judgments but to one's sense of global self-worth as well. According to this analysis, we will have a very positive judgment about our overall worth if we perceive that significant others hold us in high regard. If we perceive that others feel negatively about us, we will internalize this attitude and have a very low opinion of ourselves, in general.

A more circumscribed version of this formulation can be seen in the writings of other theorists who have underscored the importance of feeling accepted by the important others in one's life, beginning with one's parents. Epstein (1973) emphasized what he terms love worthiness. Coopersmith (1967) described it as significance, namely acceptance, attention, and affection from others. White (1963) also highlighted this source of general self-esteem, noting that the esteem in which we are held by others begins to assume importance as soon as the child can sense that others are a source of attitudes. With this comes the realization that one's parents, in particular, possess and convey an attitude about one's worth as a child.

Competence as a Source of Self-Worth. As a general dimension, competence has appeared in several models of self-esteem or self-worth. Both Epstein (1973) and Coopersmith (1967) included competence or success at meeting achievement demands as a determinant of global self-esteem. White (1963) placed more emphasis on the early experience of efficacy, the sense that one can make things happen in one's world.

James took his analysis a step further, asserting that it was primarily one's achievements in those areas that were deemed important that were the critical determinates of one's overall sense of esteem. He formalized this position, in an equation in which self-esteem equalled the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions. Pretensions for James represented those domains in which it was important to achieve success. Thus, if one's level of success was comparable to one's desire for success, then positive self-esteem would result. If one's level of success fell short of one's pretensions or desires for success, negative self-esteem would result. It is important to note that according to this position, one would not simply sum or average one's competencies across domains in order to predict self-worth. Rather, one would only take into account those domains that were related as important to the subject. We explore the applicability of this model to predicting children's self-worth in the next section.

Applicability of Cooley's and James' Formulations to the Self-Worth of Children

In our own work (see Harter, 1986) we have sought to determine whether either of these two models accounts for the tremendous individual differences we find in children's self-worth. In order to examine these formulations, it is necessary to first quantify each of the relevant variables. Our self-worth subscale provides a score of the child's overall sense of worth. However, we also need to assess the child's sense of acceptance, support, and regard from significant others. In addition, we need a measure of the importance of success for each domain that we can then compare to the child's perceived competence or adequacy in each domain.

Acceptance, Support, Regard. In order to assess this constellation of perceptions, we designed a new questionnaire that focussed on the degree to which children felt that their parents and peers accepted them, supported them, and treated them with regard. Parent items tapped the degree to which children felt that their parents treated them like a person, cared about their children's feelings, listened to their problems, understood them, and treated them like someone who really mattered. We employed the same question format we had constructed for the Self-Perception Profile described earlier. A sample item from the parent scale would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Really True for me</th>
<th>Sort of True for me</th>
<th>BUT</th>
<th>Other kids have parents who don't usually treat their children like a person who matters.</th>
<th>Sort of True for me</th>
<th>Really True for me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some kids have parents who treat their children like a person who really matters.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The peer items assessed the degree to which others their age treated them like a person, helped them with problems, cared they felt, kept their secrets, etc. (These items were cast into the same question format.)

We have examined the relationship between these scores and children's self-worth scores for numerous children between the ages of 10 and 13. For example, if we divide children into those that have high self-worth and those that have low self-worth, the pattern is very clear. Children with high self-worth feel that the significant others in their lives, both parents and peers, accept them, support them, and hold them in high regard. That is, they have high scores on the parent and peer measures just described. Conversely, children with low self-worth feel that they are not accepted or supported by parents and peers, that they are not
treated as a person who matters (see top of Table 3.3). Thus, there is strong support for Cooley's view that the regard that significant others have for the self influences one's own sense of self-worth. The acceptance, support, and positive regard from others is a critical determinant of one's overall sense of worth as a person.

The Relationship Between Competence and the Importance of Success. The essence of James' formulation is that high self-worth individuals are competent in domains where success is important. Low self-worth individuals are not competent in areas where they wish to be successful. In order to examine this theoretical proposition, it was first necessary to ascertain how important each child considered the five specific domains to be. Using the same kids—other kids question format—we devised questions in which we asked how important scholastic success, athletic success, popularity, behavioral conduct, and attractiveness were to the child's worth as a person.

For illustrative purposes, consider Child E and Child F whose profiles are presented at the bottom of Fig. 3.3. Each of these children has a very similar profile across the five domains. They feel very good about themselves with regard to their popularity and physical appearance. They feel pretty good about their behavioral conduct, not very good about their schoolwork, and pretty bad about their athletic ability. Thus, their profiles across the specific domains are virtually identical. However, Child E has very high self-worth (3.7) and Child F has very low self-worth (1.5). How can their self-worth scores be so different?

The answer lies in the differences in importance that each of these children attaches to the various domains. These differences are presented in the bottom of Table 3.3. First note that the competence or adequacy judgments of these two children are identical, as we also saw from Fig. 3.3. The domains are arranged here from the highest domain (popularity) to the lowest (sports), with the competence/adequacy scores in parenthesis. However, their importance scores differ in critical ways. For Child E, competence/adequacy judgments and importance scores are comparable to one another. Domains in which Child E is performing well (popularity and appearance) are rated as very important. An area in which she is only pretty good (behavioral conduct) is rated as just pretty important. The domain of schoolwork, where she is not very good, is rated not very important. And her worst domain, sports, is rated not at all important.

To summarize Child E, her competence/adequacy scores are comparable to her importance judgments. She has a hierarchy of competence scores that is very congruent with her hierarchy of importance scores. She is doing well in areas that are important to her. Popularity and attractiveness are very important to her and she considers herself very popular and very attractive. She is not uniformly competent in all areas. She admits that she does not do well at schoolwork and sports. However, she does not feel that these areas are that important to her. It does not bother her that she gets C's on her report card and that she is not chosen to be on athletic teams; that is, she is able to discount the importance of things she is not good at and emphasize those areas where she is doing well. In this way, she can maintain her sense of high self-worth.

Child F has a different pattern of importance scores for his less competent domains. For example, he considers his behavioral conduct to be only pretty good, yet he still considers it to be very important. His schoolwork is even worse, yet he continues to regard it as very important. In his worst area, sports, success is still pretty important. Thus, we have a child whose competence hierarchy and whose importance hierarchy are not congruent with each other. This is most evident for those domains in which competence is lacking, where importance scores are higher than his competence/adequacy judgments; that is, he is unable to discount the importance of things he is not good at. This is a boy for whom scholastic success is very important, despite his poor showing. This is a boy who very badly wants to be on the school soccer team; this is very important to him, yet he does not have the athletic skills to make the team. Because he is not competent in a number of areas where success is important to him, his self-worth suffers. He cannot live up to his expectations and desired competence.

### Table 3.3
Features of High and Low Self-Worth Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence/Adequacy</th>
<th>Importance of Success</th>
<th>Competence/Adequacy</th>
<th>Importance of Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popularity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Popular (4)</td>
<td>Very Important (4)</td>
<td>Very Popular (4)</td>
<td>Very Important (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Attractive (4)</td>
<td>Very Important (4)</td>
<td>Very Attractive (4)</td>
<td>Important (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty Good (3)</td>
<td>Very Important (3)</td>
<td>Pretty Good (3)</td>
<td>Important (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwork</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Good (2)</td>
<td>Not Very Important (2)</td>
<td>Not Very Good (2)</td>
<td>Important (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty Bad (1)</td>
<td>Not at all Important  (1)</td>
<td>Pretty Bad (1)</td>
<td>Important (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is but one illustrative example involving only two children. When we examine the pattern of scores across large numbers of children, however, we find clear support for James' notion that one's level of competence or perceived adequacy in areas where success is important strongly impacts one's overall sense of worth as a person. Children with high self-worth are children who are doing well in areas where success is important, and who can discount the importance of their less competent areas. Children who are not doing well in certain areas but continue to assert that these domains are important will suffer in terms of low self-worth.

Summary of the Determinants of Self-Worth. The evidence provides clear support for the formulations of both Cooley and James. Perceived positive regard from significant others is strongly related to self-worth, suggesting that children (ages 10 to 13) adopt the attitudes and opinions that they feel others hold toward the self. In addition, the degree to which one feels one is competent in areas where success is important, and has the ability to discount the importance of domains where one feels less adequate, is also an important determinant of self-worth. Moreover, these effects appear to be additive. Thus, the child with the highest sense of overall worth as a person will acknowledge the regard or esteem of others as well as feel competent in areas of importance. The child with the lowest sense of self-worth feels that significant others are not accepting as well as that he or she is not performing competently in areas of importance. Both of these factors, therefore, need to be taken into account in order for us to understand the reasons why a child does, or does not, feel good about the self, in general.

The Stability of Self-Judgments
A question that is often asked concerns the stability of self-judgments, both domain-specific evaluations and global self-worth. Should one's sense of self be regarded as trait like, a relatively enduring characteristic of the individual? Or is it susceptible to change? If it can and does change, what factors are responsible?

The answers to these questions hinge on both developmental and environmental factors. Over relatively short periods of time, for example, within a single school year, one's domain-specific judgments and one's self-worth are moderately stable for most children (Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1982; Wylie, 1979). In addition, self-judgments are more likely to be stable within particular periods of development, e.g., middle to late elementary school grades, then across periods of developmental and/or environmental change.

The transition to junior high school, for example, is likely to have an influence on self-judgments. There is some evidence that self-esteem is lowered as pupils move into the new school environment of junior high (Harter & Kowalski, 1985; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1971). However, these effects depend on the individual pupil. Our own data suggest that for certain children the transition to seventh grade takes a major toll in terms of a lowered sense of competency and self-worth. For other children, however, there is little effect, and some children actually show increases in their sense of competence, popularity, and self-worth.

In one interesting comparison, we looked at two groups of children making the transition from a sixth-grade elementary school to a seventh-grade junior high school, those whose self-worth increased and those whose self-worth decreased (Harter, 1986). In keeping with James' formulation, we found that pupils whose self-worth increased had a greater congruence between their competence scores and their importance ratings in seventh grade than they did in sixth grade. Certain students in this group became more competent in areas that were important to them; for example, appearance remained important and they felt that they became more attractive. Other students adjusted their importance rating, that is, they became able to discount the importance of domains in which they were not competent; for example, they may have decided that scholastic success was not as important now, whereas their popularity became more important.

In contrast, pupils whose self-worth decreased as they moved into seventh grade had greater discrepancies between competence and importance compared to sixth grade. Some felt that they were becoming less competent in areas that were still important; for example, they were doing less well scholastically, though still asserting the importance of academic competence. Others were increasing the importance of domains that were not their most competent; for example, popularity or attractiveness became more important, though their adequacy in these domains did not. These different patterns alert us to the fact that we should not expect entrance into new school environments or life situations to have the same effect on all individuals. It depends on the relationship between their particular competencies, the importance of these domains, and the priorities of the peer culture.

The accuracy of self-judgments also changes with development and with transitions to new environments. In the scholastic domain, children become increasingly more accurate over the grade-school years, as evidenced by a systematic increase in the correlation between their perceived scholastic competence and either teacher's ratings or achievement scores (Harter, 1982). However, the accuracy of judgments about one's scholastic competence takes a nose dive in seventh grade for students making the transition to a junior high school. The new school structure, bringing with it new academic challenges and a new group of students with whom to compare the self, disrupts the self-evaluative process. Accuracy shows a marked recovery in eighth grade, as students begin to make more realistic judgments of their abilities in relation to the academic demands and the performance of others in their reference group. The overall pattern, therefore, suggests that self-judgments are not as stable as theorists might have previously believed. When one considers the interaction between the develop-
mental level of the child and his or her particular environment, one comes to appreciate how factors act to cause changes in one’s sense of self.

The Effects of Self-Judgments on Emotions, Motivation, and Behavior

In the preceding sections we have dealt with the nature of self-description, the self-evaluation process, the antecedents of one’s sense of worth, and the stability of self-judgments. Yet one critical question still remains. Does one’s sense of self influence one’s emotional life, one’s motivation, one’s performance at life’s tasks? We can ask this question both at the level of domain-specific judgments and at the level of one’s sense of global self-worth.

At the domain-specific level, the primary evidence comes from the scholastic domain. In the 1960s and 1970s numerous studies (see Harter, 1983; Purkey, 1970) were conducted on the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement. These findings revealed a positive relationship between perceived academic competence and one’s actual school achievement level. Children who perceive their academic competence to be high are more likely to be academic achievers, whereas those whose perceived academic competence is low are more likely to be the poorer students.

In recent years, there has been an attempt to examine a broader network of relationships. Within the scholastic domain, for example, investigators have been interested in the emotional or affective reactions that children have in response to their academic performance, as well as in children’s motivation for classroom learning. The findings suggest the network or chain of relationships depicted in Fig. 3.4 (adapted from Harter & Connell, 1984).

The children who are achieving scholastically typically perceive their scholastic competence to be relatively high. Such children, in turn, have a positive affective reaction to their schoolwork; they feel good about their performance. This emotional reaction, in turn, seems to provide the impetus for classroom learning. Specifically, children who feel good about their schoolwork are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, namely to be curious, to find schoolwork interesting, and to prefer challenge. This motivational orientation, in turn, leads to a relatively high level of achievement.

In contrast, there are children who get into a more negative cycle. Their achievement level is low, they perceive themselves to be relatively incompetent, they feel badly about their performance, which in turn leads to a more extrinsic classroom orientation in which they avoid challenge in favor of easy assignments and show little interest or pleasure in classroom learning; they tend to do the minimum that the school system requires. This orientation, in turn, leads to lower levels of actual achievement. This pattern of findings indicates that within the specific domain of academic performance one’s sense of self, as defined by perceived scholastic competence, is intimately related to other systems within the individual, namely emotional reactions, motivational patterns, and actual academic behavior.

The Effects of Global Self-Worth

One can find similar relationships at a more global level if one examines the effects of self-worth on one’s emotional and motivational responses. This larger question has been addressed within the study on the determinants of self-worth. Having established that positive regard from significant others and competence in domains deemed important to the individual were critical antecedents, we were interested in the impact that self-worth had on children’s general mood and motivation (Harter & Hogan, 1985).

By mood, we mean one’s general affective reaction or state along a dimension of happy or cheerful to sad or depressed. We assessed mood through a series of questions in which we asked about the degree to which children generally felt happy versus sad, cheerful versus depressed, up versus down, employing the same kids—other kids question format.

Motivation was defined as the degree to which one was interested, and had the energy to engage, in age-appropriate activities. Thus, question (in the same format) asked children whether they had enough energy to get them through the day, whether they enjoyed doing the kinds of things most kids their age liked to do, whether they were interested in the things they were supposed to do each day, etc. Both mood and motivation questions were designed to be general, because we wanted global judgments that we could then relate to children’s judgment of their overall sense of worth. (See Fig. 3.5 that depicts these components within the larger model.)

The findings revealed a chain of casual effects. As reported earlier, competence in domains where success was important, and positive regard from others, strongly influenced self-worth. Self-worth, in turn, had a very dramatic impact on children’s mood. Mood, in turn, had a large effect on motivation. These

relationships reveal that the high self-worth child is typically in a cheerful mood; positive judgments about the self in general lead one to feel relatively happy. These feelings of happiness, in turn, seem to fuel the child, leading one to have emotional and motivational systems that propel the child toward the development of an ever-expanding repertoire of new skills. One's sense of self, therefore, is very central to those processes that promote adjustment and continued psychological growth.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter began with a developmental analysis of self-description. There we saw how the self changes dramatically with development. The attributes that define the self-concept, their organization, their stability, their accuracy, the criteria on which they are based, the ability to observe the self, all change with age. These differences are in large part due to cognitive-developmental changes in interaction with the child's socialization experiences.

The nature of the self-evaluation process was also examined. The evidence indicates that children evaluate their performance differently, depending on the particular domain. Five domains were emphasized, scholastic competence, athletic competence, popularity, behavioral conduct, and physical appearance. It was urged that one approach the issue of self-evaluation by considering a child's profile of scores across these domains.

In addition to these domain-specific judgments, children age 8 and older are capable of making a global judgment of their overall worth as a person. Evidence indicates that there are two primary determinants of a child's self-worth. The first involves the internalization of attitudes that significant others hold toward the self. The more one feels that others accept, support, and have regard for the self, the higher one's self-worth. The second determinant involves the degree to which one feels competent or adequate in areas where success is important. If one meets one's performance standards in these areas, and can discount the importance of domains in which one is not competent, high self-worth will result.

The stability of children's self-judgments was also examined. The findings indicate that self-judgments are moderately stable over short periods of time during which the child is not faced with major change. During periods of developmental and/or environmental change, for example, the transition to junior high school, self-judgments may well undergo change.

Finally, we explored the question of whether self-judgments have any impact on the child's emotions, motivation, and behavior. For domain-specific judgments as well as global self-worth, the findings indicate that one's sense of self has a major impact on one's emotional life, which in turn influences children's motivation and behavior. Thus, self-judgments are intimately related to other systems within the child that are critical for development.

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Social Cognition

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Over 100 years ago, G. Stanley Hall attempted to determine the contents of young children's minds (Hall, 1883). In this ambitious project, more than 400 children were asked approximately 140 questions. Items were drawn from many different content domains, including animals, body parts, shapes, color, origins of foodstuffs, and vocabulary. On the basis of this survey, Hall concluded, "there is next to nothing of pedagogic value the knowledge of which it is safe to assume at the onset of school life" (p. 137). Only one of Hall's published questions, however, even remotely sampled social understanding ("Name three right and three wrong things"). This neglect of the child's social world reflected the predominantly cognitive and physical priorities of the early child study movement.

By the 1930s, children's social behavior had emerged as a major research topic. Sociometrics and the study of children's relationship patterns rose to popularity in the 1950s. It was not until the 1970s, however, that children's social knowledge entered the mainstream of developmental research. Social cognitions have since become one of the most active areas of study for researchers from a variety of theoretical orientations (Fiske & Taylor, 1984).

From modern perspectives, then, Hall missed perhaps the most important knowledge base that a young child brings to school—knowledge of social phenomena. A child who cannot draw social inferences (e.g., judging motives and emotions, anticipating others' actions) is ill equipped for social interaction. Similarly, a child who lacks social knowledge (e.g., is not aware of social norms, insensitive to role relationships) is at a considerably social disadvantage.

This is a difficult domain to master. In fact, acquiring accurate and useful social knowledge may be more difficult than learning about the nonsocial world.