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How Children Construct Views of Themselves: A Social-Developmental Perspective

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As they grow up, children construct views of themselves and their place in the world, known as their self-concept. This topic has often been addressed by social psychologists (studying how the self-concept is influenced by social contexts) and developmental psychologists (studying how the self-concept changes over time). Yet, relatively little is known about the origins of the self-concept. This article calls for research that bridges social and developmental psychology to illuminate this important issue. Adopting such a social-developmental approach, the current special section shows that children construct their self-concept based on the social relationships they have, the feedback they receive, the social comparisons they make, and the cultural values they endorse. These findings underline the deeply social nature of self-development.

"Who am I, and what is my place in the world?" Children are born without an answer to these pressing questions. As they grow up, though, they begin to formulate answers seemingly effortlessly. Within a few years, they recognize themselves in the mirror, refer to themselves by their own name, evaluate themselves through the eyes of others, and understand their standing in social groups (Harter, 2012; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Rochat, 2009; Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992). These remarkable capacities give rise to children's *self-concept*—representations and evaluations of themselves.

Over time, pronounced individual differences arise in children's self-concept. Some children like themselves, whereas others feel negatively about themselves. Some children see themselves as superior and deserving special treatment, whereas others consider themselves to be on an equal plane with others. Some children believe they can grow and build their abilities, whereas others believe their abilities are fixed and unchangeable. Where do these individual differences come from? What leads children to see themselves the way they do? Surprisingly little is known about the origins of children's self-concept. The aim of this special section is to showcase emerging research that illuminates this important issue.

Historically, the self-concept has often been studied by two fields: social psychology (studying how the self-concept is influenced by social contexts) and developmental psychology (studying how the self-concept changes over time). This article calls for research that bridges these fields to illuminate the origins of children's self-concept. Such a

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Section Editors' Note: We received 49 Letters of Intent in response to our Call for Papers. We ranked letters independently, and invited 11 full manuscripts. All invited manuscripts were reviewed by at least 3 external reviewers, and we accepted 8 of them for publication. Manuscripts that we authored ourselves were not handled by us, but by Associate Editor Tina Malti or Main Editor Cynthia Garcia Coll, and were reviewed by at least 3 external reviewers.

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social-developmental approach promises to generate knowledge that neither field can generate by itself—knowledge of the precise processes through which social relationships shape children's views of themselves over the course of development. In this article, we first define the self-concept, and describe how it has been studied by social and developmental psychologists thus far. We then outline the social-developmental approach, and discuss how articles in the current special section illustrate this approach. We close by outlining priorities for future research.

The Self-Concept

Almost everyone uses the word *self* on a daily basis, and most people have an intuitive understanding of what the self means (Baumeister, 1998). Even young children do. Starmans (2017) shows that young children see the self as something that is unique to a person, separate from the body, stable over time, and located within the head, behind the eyes. Despite our colloquial understanding of the self, arriving at a scientific definition of the self has proven difficult (Allport, 1943). In fact, the self has been defined in so many ways that some scholars have worried that the term may have lost its meaning altogether (Leary, 2004; Olson, 1998). Researchers have therefore been urged to define clearly what they mean by the self.

Scholars often distinguish between the I-Self (the *self-as-subject* or *self-as-knower*) and the Me-Self (the *self-as-object* or *self-as-known*; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Harter, 2012; James, 1890). This special section focuses on children's self-concept: children's representations and evaluations of themselves as individuals (or how the I-Self perceives the Me-Self). The articles in this special section study various dimensions of children's self-concept, including self-esteem, self-compassion, mindsets, and self-perceived ability.

The self-concept is not a static property but rather a dynamic cognitive construction, much like a theory (Epstein, 1973). Going about their everyday lives, individuals often take on the role of scientists: They form theories, generate hypotheses, gather data, weigh the evidence, and revise their theories accordingly (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Kelly, 1955). Just as individuals form theories about the outside world, they form theories about themselves and their interactions with the outside world. Thus, the self-concept can be defined as "a theory that the individual has unwittingly constructed about himself as an experiencing, functioning individual" (Epstein, 1973, p. 407). Much like a scientific theory, the self-concept structures everyday experiences, imbues them with meaning, and suggests effective ways of navigating them. Thus, the self-concept does not merely reflect ongoing behavior, it actually guides behavior (Bandura, 1978; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Even if the self-concept operates like a theory, individuals do not always revise their self-concept in the face of new data (Greenwald, 1980; Sedikides, Green, Saunders, Skowronski, & Zengel, 2016; Swann, 2012). They may not be interested in the data, they may lack the cognitive capacities to incorporate the data, they may dismiss the data as invalid, or they may be motivated to maintain their self-concept despite the data. In fact, most individuals hold rosy views of themselves, even if reality disputes those views (e.g., most individuals, even convicted offenders, see themselves as more moral, honest, trustworthy, generous, and compassionate than the average member of the community; Sedikides, Meek, Alicke, & Taylor, 2014).

The self-concept exists at different levels of abstraction (Harter, 2012). At an elementary level, individuals conceive of themselves in terms of *concrete, observable behaviors*, such as "I can count to 10." At a higher level, individuals abstract over these behaviors to represent *general traits or abilities*, such as "I am good at counting." At an even higher level, individuals abstract over these traits to evaluate their *overall worth*, such as "I am satisfied with myself." Such global evaluations of one's worth are known as *self-esteem* or *self-worth*.

A common assumption is that young children lack the ability to abstract over their behaviors to evaluate their general traits and overall worth. But Cimpian, Hammond, Mazza, and Corry (2017) discovered that children as young as 4 years old can form such abstractions, even in nuanced, context-sensitive ways. For example, when children this age fail on a task, they may conclude that they are unworthy, but they do so only when they believe the task is important to adults. Children infer that failure on such tasks leads adults to disapprove of them, which in turn makes them feel down about themselves (cf. Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, even young children have the cognitive architecture to form abstract views of themselves.

A Social-Developmental Approach

How do children construct views of themselves? How do they internalize their experiences to form representations and evaluations of themselves? These questions have been debated by scholars since the early days of psychology. Although their perspectives differ, scholars agree that social relationships are at the heart of self-development. William James (1890) noted that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind" (p. 294). Symbolic interactionists viewed the self-concept as socially constructed (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), assuming that children come to see themselves as they believe they are seen by significant others. That is, children internalize the reflected appraisals of others, forming their self-concept as if through a "looking glass" (Tice & Wallace, 2003). Since these classical perspectives emerged, scholars from various backgrounds (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, sociology, ethology) have argued that children develop their self-concept through their interactions with others (Fogel, 1993; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004; Harter, 2012; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Meltzoff, 1990; Rochat, 2009; Stern, 1985; Swann, 1983; Tomasello, 1993).

And yet, empirical research on the origins of children's self-concept has been rather scarce and scattered. One reason, we suspect, is that the two main fields concerned with this topic—social and developmental psychology—have remained relatively insular. Social psychologists study how social contexts influence people's views of themselves. They typically undertake experiments in laboratory settings. For example, they examine how exposing people to a particular social context, or changing their subjective construal of that context, affects their views of themselves in that context. Social psychologists mostly conduct their studies with adult participants, assuming that the psychological processes they examine have fully matured. In a classic example (Morse & Gergen, 1970), adult job applicants were seated in the presence of another applicant. The other applicant was either confident, well prepared, and well groomed ("Mr. Clean") or unconfident, unprepared, and dressed in dirty clothes ("Mr. Dirty"). Job applicants who thought they were competing with Mr. Clean decreased in self-esteem, whereas those who thought they were competing with Mr. Dirty increased in self-esteem. Although such research uncovers the causal influence of precisely defined social contexts on adults' self-concept in controlled settings, it provides little insight into how these processes unfold and cumulate over the course of development in real-world settings.

By contrast, developmental psychologists study how children's views of themselves change over the course of development. They typically undertake cross-sectional or longitudinal studies in field settings. For example, they examine when children's self-concept emerges, how it changes over time, or how it is related to relatively broad features of their social environment, such as quality of the parent–child relationship. Developmental psychologists mostly conduct their studies with children: focusing on one age group, comparing different age groups, or following an age cohort over time. Rather than manipulating children's social contexts, developmental psychologists typically index natural variation in children's social contexts through questionnaires or observations. In one classic example (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987), children reported their self-esteem before and after the transition to junior high school, and they reported major life changes (e.g., moving into another neighborhood, experiencing major family disruption). Girls' self-esteem declined across the transition to junior high school —and the more life changes girls experienced during this transition, the more their self-esteem declined. Although such research provides important insights into how the self-concept changes over time in real-world settings, it does not uncover whether the effects of the social environment are causal, nor the precise psychological processes that underlie those effects.

At a surface level, social and developmental psychology seem to address quite distinct questions. A closer look, however, reveals that the two fields pursue a common goal. At the heart of both fields is the goal to gain a thorough understanding of how people come to see themselves the way they do. We argue that, to achieve this common goal, future research should bridge social and developmental psychology. Such a *social-developmental approach* to self-development combines the fields' unique theoretical and methodological orientations (for related proposals, see Olson & Dweck, 2008; Pomerantz & Newman, 2000; Ruble & Goodnow, 1998). It combines social psychology's attention for precise social contexts with developmental psychology's attention for long-term development. It combines social psychology's use of laboratory experiments to isolate causal processes with developmental psychology's use of longitudinal field studies to uncover how such processes emerge and unfold over time in real-world settings. By bridging the fields, researchers can acquire knowledge that neither field can acquire by itself—knowledge of the precise processes through which social relationships shape children's views of themselves over the course of development.

How Social Relationships Shape the Self-Concept

As a whole, this special section illustrates the promise of bridging social and developmental psychology in studying the origins of children's self-concept. Each article starts with a developmental psychological question: How do children come to see themselves the way they do? In the spirit of social psychology, the articles do not study broad features of children's social environment; rather, they identify and isolate precise social contexts that are theorized to affect how children define themselves. They do so, for example, using detailed observations of parent–child interactions in fields settings (e.g., indexing subtle differences in the wording of parental feedback) or careful experimental manipulations of social relationships in laboratory settings (e.g., exposing children to particular social feedback). These social experiences come to form children's self-concept, such as their self-esteem, self-compassion, mindsets, and self-perceived ability.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to a global evaluation of oneself as a person (Harter, 1990). Although it fluctuates over time, more so for some than for others (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), children have an average tone of self-esteem that remains relatively stable over days, weeks, months, and even years (Trzesniewski, Brent, & Robins, 2003). Children with high self-esteem are satisfied with themselves, but do not necessarily consider themselves superior to their fellow humans. Such feelings of superiority are at the core of narcissism rather than self-esteem (Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016). Unlike narcissists, individuals with high self-esteem rarely lash out against others for small perceived slights (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), and are at reduced risk of developing anxiety and depression (Orth, Robins, Meier, & Conger, 2016).

Since the 1970s, parents—especially those from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) backgrounds—have become increasingly concerned with raising children's self-esteem (Brummelman, Crocker, & Bushman, 2016; Dweck, 1999), and they try to do so by lavishing children with praise. In fact, 87% of parents believe that children need praise in order to feel good about themselves (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2011; also see Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Parents may believe that praise is especially effective when phrased in overly positive, inflated ways: "You're *amazing*!" or "You did *incredibly* well!" (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014).

However, inflated praise may not succeed in raising self-esteem. In fact, when children are told that they did incredibly well, they may infer they should do incredibly well all the time. Struggles and setbacks are inevitable, so children may eventually fall short of the standards set for them, and therefore feel down about themselves (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016). Brummelman, Nelemans, Thomaes, and Orobio de Castro (2017) set out to examine this possibility in an observational–longitudinal study in late childhood. They discovered that parents gave more inflated praise to children with low self-esteem, probably in a well-intentioned attempt to cure their low self-esteem. But the inflated praise, in turn, predicted lower self-esteem in children over time. Lowered self-esteem may have motivated parents to provide even more inflated praise, creating a self-reinforcing downward spiral. Thus, parents inadvertently worsened the problem they intended to solve.

Parents often attempt to raise children's self-esteem directly (Harter, 2012), such as through praise. It might be more effective to raise children's self-esteem indirectly, such as by establishing warm bonds with them: sharing joy with them, showing interest in their activities, and making them feel loved (Brummelman et al., 2015). According to sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), self-esteem is an internal monitor of the degree to which one is valued by others; warm bonds with one's parents should therefore raise self-esteem, perhaps especially in childhood, when self-esteem is relatively malleable (Harris et al., 2015). Harris et al. (2017) found support for this idea. In their longitudinal study involving children ages 5–13, parents' warmth and support predicted higher self-esteem over time.

Harris et al. also conducted fine-grained observations of parent–child discussions of emotional events. They looked, in particular, at the extent to which parents provided children with causal explanations of their negative emotions (e.g., "You must have felt hurt because your best friend didn't want to play with you"). Such explanations may help children understand the broader meaning of painful events, and make them feel understood by their parents. Indeed, parents' causal explanations fostered children's secure attachment to their parents, which translated into higher self-esteem.

Together, these findings show that building warm relationships with children can be an effective means to raise their self-esteem. Becht et al. (2017) discovered that such relationships not only raise self-esteem, but also build self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity refers to how clearly, confidently, and consistently individuals define themselves—that is, how well they know who they are (Campbell et al., 1996). Especially in WEIRD societies, establishing self-concept clarity is considered an important developmental task of adolescence; the underlying assumption is that those who know who they are can stay true to their beliefs and values, withstanding social pressure (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003).

Becht et al. (2017) reasoned that when adolescents have supportive relationships with their parents and peers, they feel the freedom to explore who they are, which helps them form clearer views of themselves. The researchers conducted a five-wave longitudinal study in adolescence, and found that adolescents with more supportive relationships indeed formed clearer views of themselves. Adolescents with clearer views of themselves, in turn, formed more supportive relationships—perhaps because their self-certainty enabled them to feel more comfortable around others, leading others to like them better (Stinson, Cameron, Wood, Gaucher, & Holmes, 2009).

Self-Compassion

Although self-esteem reflects an evaluation of oneself, its cousin—self-compassion—reflects an orientation to care for oneself (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009). When children struggle, fail, or face their inadequacies, they can respond with different levels of caring for themselves. Some children treat themselves kindly; they take a nonjudgmental and caring attitude toward themselves, and recognize that their experiences are part of the common human experience. Other children treat themselves harshly; they take a critical attitude toward themselves, and become wrapped up in their distress. These responses reflect individual differences in self-compassion (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion protects mental health in the face of adversity (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007).

Peter and Gazelle (2017) conducted the first longitudinal study on the origins of self-compassion in youth. They built on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which holds that children construct mental representations of themselves, others, and their relationships with others (known as *working models*) based on their social interactions (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). When parents are sensitive to their signals (e.g., distress) and care for them in times of need, children develop positive working models of themselves and others, which form the basis of secure attachment. When children know that their parents care for them—in good times and in bad—they may learn to take the same caring, nonjudgmental attitude toward themselves. Secure attachment relationships can thus cultivate self-compassion.

Peter and Gazelle reasoned that attachment security would be especially beneficial for children who struggle. In their longitudinal study, timed in late childhood, they zoomed in on children who are high in anxious solitude: children who are socially withdrawn due to their anxiety about how they might be seen or treated by their peers (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). Among children high in anxious solitude, those with secure attachments had high level of self-compassion and maintained those levels over time. Interestingly, children with secure attachments with both of their parents were more self-compassionate than those with secure attachment with only one of their parents. Thus, children seem to internalize their parents' nonjudgmental, caring attitude toward themselves, forming self-compassion.

Mindsets

Children form views of not only who they are, but also meta-beliefs (or mindsets) about the nature of human traits and abilities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Children with more of a *growth mindset* believe that their abilities can grow and develop through effort, strategies, and education. They are more eager to take on challenging activities, because they see those activities as opportunities for learning. When they struggle or encounter setbacks, they persist more grittily, and try different strategies to solve the problem at hand. By contrast, children with more of a *fixed mindset* believe that their abilities are set in stone. They tend to avoid challenging activities, because they see those activities as threats; if success means they are smart, failure means they are not. When they struggle or encounter setbacks, they are more likely to infer that they do not have what it takes, and give up readily. A growing body of research shows that having a growth mindset benefits academic outcomes, especially among students who struggle (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016).

How do children form mindsets? Scholars have long believed that parents simply pass on their own mindsets to their children, with growth-mindset parents raising growth-mindset children. Yet parents' mindsets are surprisingly weakly related to their children's mindsets (Gunderson et al., 2013). If not through their own mindsets, how do parents shape children's mindsets? In their theoretical article, Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) propose an answer. They argue that parents shape children's mindsets through behaviors that change children's understanding of success and failure.

When children succeed, it is almost impossible for parents (at least parents from WEIRD backgrounds) not to lavish them with praise. However, parents differ in the way they praise. Some parents give more *person praise*—praise for the child's abilities, such as "You're so smart!" Such praise leads children to believe that ability is fixed and can be read from a single performance. Other parents give more *process praise*—praise for the process that led to the child's success, such as "You've worked so hard!" Such praise leads children to believe that ability can grow and develop. These findings have been replicated across laboratory experiments (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Longitudinal studies show that receiving such praise frequently in daily life predicts children's mindsets over months or even years (Gunderson et al., 2013; Pomerantz & Kempner, 2013).

Although parents respond to children's successes almost automatically, they may give more thought to how to respond to children's failures. Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) discuss research showing that parents' responses to children's failures are inspired by their beliefs about the consequences of those failures. Some parents see failure as something that benefits learning and growth (a *failure-is-enhancing mindset*), whereas other parents see it as something that compromises learning and growth (a *failure-is-debilitating mindset*; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). Parents with a failure-is-enhancing mindset respond to children's failures by focusing on the process, such as helping children understand how they can learn from failure (e.g., "I'd encourage my child to tell me what she learned from doing poorly on the quiz"), which may cultivate a growth mindset. By contrast, parents with a failure-is-debilitating mindset respond to children's failures with concerns about children's ability and with efforts to comfort children for not having what it takes (e.g., "I'd try to comfort my child to tell her it's okay if she isn't the most talented in all subjects"), which may cultivate a fixed mindset.

Thus, parents can powerfully influence children's mindsets by helping them understand the meaning of success and failure. They can foster a growth mindset by helping children see their successes and failures as part of an ongoing learning process—successes as products of effort and effective strategies, and failures as opportunities for growth.

Self-Perceived Ability

A key task for children is to gain accurate knowledge of their abilities, so that they can navigate the world effectively. Without such knowledge, they would not know which challenges are within the range of their abilities. Unfortunately, there are often no objective benchmarks that inform children about their abilities. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) holds that, in these cases, children turn to social comparison: They compare themselves with others so as to evaluate their own abilities. From preschool onward, children make social comparisons spontaneously (Mosatche & Bragonier, 1981), and use these comparisons to evaluate themselves (Butler, 1998). When children are outperformed by others, they often feel bad about themselves and their performance (Ruble, Eisenberg, & Higgins, 1994).

Despite young children's ability to engage in social comparison, their self-evaluations often remain unrealistically positive. For example, when they are outperformed by classmates, they may still consider themselves to be the smartest one in class. Why? Lapan and Boseovski (2017) reasoned that young children may not fully realize the implications of their peers' skill level in making social comparisons. That is, young children may consider themselves highly capable, even when they are outperformed by unskilled peers. In two experiments, children were outperformed by a peer who was portrayed as being either skilled (e.g., "Casey is a smart boy") or unskilled (e.g., "Casey is *not* a smart boy"). Young children (ages 5–6) evaluated their performance positively, regardless of the peer's skill level. Older children (ages 8–10) also evaluated their performance positively, except when they were outperformed by an unskilled peer. Unlike the younger children, they understood that being outperformed by an unskilled peer meant that they performed poorly.

These findings show that older children evaluate themselves more realistically. But even their self-evaluations are overwhelmingly positive. Thomaes, Brummelman, and Sedikides (2017) reasoned that older children may evaluate themselves positively, in part, to conform to prevailing social norms that cast favorable self-evaluations as ideal standards to live up to. WEIRD societies are replete with messages that extol favorable self-evaluations (Twenge, 2014). In an initial experiment, the researchers discovered that exposing children to such social norms led them to report more favorable evaluations of themselves. An intriguing implication is that children, in their quest to meet social norms, might conceal unfavorable evaluations of themselves. To examine this possibility, the researchers assessed children's self-evaluations while half of the children were hooked up to a bogus lie detector, ostensibly monitoring the truthfulness of their responses. Such a bogus pipeline procedure encourages children to respond truthfully (Jones & Sigall, 1971). Relative to the other children, those who were hooked up to the lie detector reported more unfavorable self-evaluations. Thus, older children indeed seem to conceal unfavorable self-evaluations to conform to the social norms of their social group.

Going Forward

Research on the origins of children's self-concept is beginning to bloom, especially at the intersection of social and developmental psychology. Bridging these fields, the current special section shows that children construct their self-concept based on the social relationships they have, the feedback they receive, the social comparisons they make, and the cultural values they endorse. These findings underline the deeply social nature of self-development. More broadly, the special section shows that researchers are moving away from cross-sectional studies that measure broad aspects of children's social environment, and toward experimental and longitudinal studies that capture the more precise social processes that underlie the development of children's self-concept. Moreover, researchers are increasingly bridging theories rooted in different disciplines (e.g., sociometer theory and attachment theory) to understand self-development. Yet, despite our growing understanding, much remains to be discovered. We outline three priorities for future research.

First, researchers should attempt to understand how children construe their social experiences, and how that affects their later views of themselves. Such understanding is often lacking; some findings are so intuitive that they hardly seem to need an explanation, such as the finding that abuse lowers self-esteem. However, to understand the effects of abuse, we should uncover the beliefs that children construct based on the abuse, and how those beliefs come to bear on new situations (Olson & Dweck, 2008; also see Griffin & Ross, 1991). Beliefs are "the means through which children package their experiences and carry them forward" (Dweck & London, 2004, p. 428). For example, when abuse leads children to conclude that they themselves are inherently flawed or defective, their self-esteem plummets and they develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 2002). They may even avoid social interactions out of fear of being mistreated. Although adaptive in the short run, this prevents them from developing the social relationships they need to regain their self-esteem (Gold, 1986), trapping them in a self-sustaining downward spiral. Thus, the beliefs that children form based on their social experiences are critical to understanding self-concept development.

Second, researchers should expand their methodological repertoire, using both experimental and longitudinal methods. Without experiments, we would be unable to uncover causal processes; and without longitudinal studies, we would be unable to examine how those processes unfold over the course of development—an unfolding that often occurs in transaction with the environment (Crocker & Brummelman, in press; Sameroff, 2010). We suspect that some developmental psychologists resist conducting laboratory experiments, because they are reticent about replacing children's natural environments with artificial ones. We suspect that some social psychologists resist using longitudinal methods in field settings, because they are unwilling to sacrifice controlled environments for uncontrolled ones. However, it is only by using both methods that we can unravel the causal effects of social relationships on children's self-concept, and how these effects unfold over time. And this can be achieved *without* sacrificing children's natural environment or our own experimental control. As articles in this special section have illustrated, laboratory experiments can be designed to mirror children's natural environments (Cimpian et al., 2017; Lapan & Boseovski, 2017), and longitudinal studies can include controlled assessments of actual parent–child interactions (Brummelman et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2017).

Third, researchers should examine the origins of children's self-concept across cultures. Cultural differences often go undetected because psychological research focuses predominantly on WEIRD populations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017). Individuals from non-WEIRD countries make up just 3% of our participants, while making up 85% of the world's population (Nielsen et al., 2017). The special section helps address this limitation by reporting research in non-WEIRD populations (e.g., Mexican-American adolescents and their parents; Knight, Carlo, White, & Streit, 2017) and by calling for systematic research on how children from diverse cultural backgrounds differ in their beliefs about the nature of the self (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017; Starmans, 2017), their views of themselves (Thomaes et al., 2017), and the socialization experiences that influence their views of themselves (Brummelman et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2017).

Such cross-cultural research has many purposes. One purpose is to establish the generalizability of findings across cultures. There can be substantial cultural variation in psychological processes that have long been assumed to be universal. For example, decades of research in WEIRD populations have suggested that parents can be classified as authoritative, authoritarian, or neglectful (Baumrind, 1966). Knight et al. (2017) suggest, however, that this may not fully capture Mexican-American parenting. Although most Mexican-American parents are authoritative, others are neither authoritarian nor neglectful. Yet despite these cultural differences, authoritative parents seem to consistently cultivate high self-esteem in children—both in Mexican-American and in European-American children (Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000). Another purpose of cross-cultural research is to illuminate the psychological processes that underlie cultural differences. Parents from WEIRD and non-WEIRD backgrounds have markedly different beliefs about the nature and importance of children's self-development (Brummelman, Crocker, et al., 2016; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). For example, when asked whether it is important to cultivate self-esteem in children, a Taiwanese mother said, "Yes, yes, but not so much" (Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002, p. 233). By contrast, an American mother said, without hesitation, that it is critical for children to "always know that they are loved, that their actions might not always be the greatest but that they are always loved and that they can try to do anything they want to do, that there are no limits" (p. 231). Such culture-specific beliefs may translate into concrete parenting behaviors (cf. Knight et al., 2017). For example, guided by their beliefs about self-esteem, Taiwanese parents may refrain from praising children, whereas American parents may praise children frequently and lavishly. These practices may, in turn, affect how children come to view themselves.

Conclusion

To fully understand the nature of self-development, we encourage researchers to adopt a social-developmental approach—an approach that bridges social and developmental psychology's unique theoretical and methodological orientations. By joining forces and crossing traditional disciplinary borders, researchers will gain a deeper understanding of how social relationships shape children's views of themselves over the course of development. As psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1966) noted, "we become ourselves through others" (p. 43).

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