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Stability and Change in Self-Conceptions as a Function of Perceived Consistency of Evaluations among Significant Others

Alan McEvoy
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STABILITY AND CHANGE IN SELF-CONCEPTIONS AS
A FUNCTION OF PERCEIVED CONSISTENCY OF
EVALUATIONS AMONG SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

by

Alan McEvoy

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment
of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 1975
This study represents an attempt to empirically test a theoretical model explicating the contingencies associated with stability and change in self-conceptions among high-school students. Specifically, this investigation is concerned with the cumulative and isolated impact of perceived parental, teacher, and peer expectations on student self-conceptions over time.

The basic postulate is that patterns of stability and change in self-conceptions are a function of the degree of perceived consistency in the expectations and evaluations of significant others. The data were supportive of the consistency model and suggest that some groups of significant others have a greater impact on the self-conceptualizing process than do others.
"I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned."

-- Thoreau (WALDEN)

"There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us--and then it flows back again . . . ."

-- H. James (PORTRAIT OF A LADY)

"... the totality of ourselves is a natural condition which we cannot obliterate altogether, and there are moments when the totality becomes apparent. At these moments one can surmise and assess what we really are."

-- Don Juan (CASTANEDA: TALES OF POWER)

"I was thoroughly aware then that my secret reservoir had been tapped and that it poured out unrestrainedly. There was no longer the sweet unity I call 'me.' There was nothing and yet that nothing was filled. It was not light or darkness, hot or cold, pleasant or unpleasant. It was not that I moved or floated or was stationary, neither was I a single unit, a self, as I am accustomed to being. I was myriad of selves which were all 'me,' a colony of separate units that had a special allegiance to one another and would join unavoidably to form one single awareness, my human awareness. I 'knew' . . . that the 'I,' the 'me,' of my familiar world was a colony, a conglomerate of separate and independent feelings that had an unbending solidarity to one another. The unbending solidarity of my countless awarenesses, the allegiance that those parts had for one another was my life force."

-- Castaneda (TALES OF POWER)

"Lost in a labyrinth of mirrors."

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words fail to adequately express my gratitude to the people who have assisted me in the completion of this study and throughout my graduate career. I am especially indebted to Dr. Edsel Erickson, chairman of my committee. His scholarly guidance and genuine humanism represent a powerful force in my intellectual and personal development. I am proud to consider him my mentor.

I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Leila Bradfield, the Grand Lady of Western Michigan University's Department of Sociology. Her insights and unceasing good cheer have been paramount in sustaining me throughout the trials and woes of a graduate education.

In addition, I would like to thank Dr. William Kanzler for the time and assistance he afforded me during this study. I seriously doubt if one could select a more cooperative and aware committee.

I would also like to thank my friend Donna Kaminski for her expert technical assistance with the computer. Thanks to her exceptional skill, I was undoubtedly spared a good deal of needless grief.

Special thanks should also be given to Janice Holthof for the companionship and care she has given me. Without her, I surely would have faltered.

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Finally, and perhaps most important, I wish to thank my parents for their constant love and support.

Alan McEvoy
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AS A FUNCTION OF PERCEIVED CONSISTENCY
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Western Michigan University, Ph.D., 1975
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ideas concerning the stability and changes of self-conceptions as functions of others' influence have long been of theoretical interest to social scientists and social philosophers in their attempts to analyze and explain various aspects of human phenomena. While theorists such as James, Cooley, Mead, Kinch, and Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner have made substantial contributions to the study of how others influence self-conceptions, there exists a paucity of empirical research on several important theoretical issues. Given this dearth of research and lack of theoretical clarity, the validity and utility of the multifarious theoretical premises about self-concept development remain in question.


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The theoretical goal of this study will be to further explicate and systematically test one dimension of self-theory concerning the contingencies associated with stability and change in self-conceptions. In addition, an effort will be made to assess the pragmatic import of certain perspectives of self-theory for educational practitioners.

Research Problem

In the early 1960's, psychologists Backman and Secord\(^1\) published a series of papers and reports dealing with stability and change in self-concept. While the majority of their work was concerned with theoretical elaboration, they did conduct one study which they consistently cited as being supportive of their model. It is this piece of research which will be the subject of scrutiny in this discussion.

Essentially, Backman and Secord contend that the locus of one's self-concept is made up of three main components which form an "interpersonal matrix": (1) a given aspect of an individual's self-concept; (2) the individual's interpretation of his behavior relevant to that aspect; and (3) the


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individual's perception of the related aspects of the other person(s) with whom he is interacting (i.e., his assessment of how others are evaluating and behaving toward him). Based on the notion that people actively attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance, Backman and Secord\(^1\) argue that the individual strives to achieve congruency among the components of the matrix. Congruency exists when the individual "perceives his behavior and that of other(s) as implying definitions of self congruent with relevant aspects of his self-concept."

While this model is concerned with the individual's perception of both his behavior and the behavior of others toward him in relation to his self-concept, Backman and Secord investigated only one of these aspects: the number of relevant others having congruent relations with a given aspect of self. More specifically, the number of different significant others perceived to behave either congruently or incongruently with a particular aspect of the individual's self-concept represented the focus of their concern. Backman and Secord\(^2\) did not investigate the individual's own behavior in terms of this matrix. The main hypothesis they tested reads as follows: "The greater the number of significant other persons who are perceived to define an aspect of an individual's self-concept congruently, the more resistant to change is

\(^{1}\)Backman, Secord, and Pierce, op. cit., p. 103.

\(^{2}\)loc. cit., p. 104.
that aspect of self."

In order to test this hypothesis, the researchers obtained a sample of undergraduate college students from introductory classes in several fields of study. All the subjects were volunteers and the actual collection of data took place on two separate Saturday mornings. In the first session, subjects were asked to rank themselves on a series of fifteen statements, each supposedly characterizing one need disposition. These fifteen needs were measured by the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS), a standard test used for personality assessment.\(^1\) In addition to ranking themselves on these need statements, the subjects were asked to estimate how they thought each of five persons important to them would rank them on these characteristics. For every subject, the experimenter selected two traits for special treatment. Both traits were ranked among the highest five applying to self by each subject, but one represented high perceived agreement among significant others and the other represented low perceived agreement.

In the second session, each subject was given a profile sheet indicating the rank order of the fifteen needs supposedly characterizing him. The subjects were told that professional psychologists had prepared the profile sheets based

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\(^1\)The EPPS is designed to measure needed dispositions (e.g., nurturance vs. dependence) through a series of fixed-choice paired statements of needs.
on the way each subject had responded on the personality assessment. However, the experimenters attempted to deceive the subjects. The subjects were given falsified reports. The rank order of traits on the report, as arranged by the experimenter, was similar to the subject's actual ranking, except that the two traits selected for special treatment were reported as being eight rank-steps lower than the subject had ranked them. Each subject was given time to study the falsified profile and was then asked to rank himself again on the EPPS. On the second ranking, most subjects ranked the two manipulated traits lower, but the trait having low perceived consensus among significant others was lowered to a greater extent than the trait having high perceived consensus among significant others. The authors concluded that this finding was supportive of the main hypothesis that an aspect of self will be more resistant to change when the individual believes that there is consensus among significant others concerning that aspect.

Despite the theoretical acumen of Backman and Secord, numerous methodological problems arise which cast serious doubt on the validity of their research. In terms of design, the researchers had no control group with which to assess the possible effect that various situational factors may have had on the consistency of response among subjects. The design could have been improved by testing a control group on the EPPS, giving them (the control group) their actual profile
sheet, and testing them again to determine response consistency. Given the way the experiment was conducted, however, there is no way to discern the reliability of the findings.

In terms of the sample, it was nonrandom with an N of only 40. In addition, these subjects were not adequately described in terms of potentially relevant social and personal characteristics such as socioeconomic status (SES), race, sex, etc. This immediately limits the generalizability of the research findings. Also, when the investigators analyzed their data they committed a rather quotidian error which many social scientists tend to overlook. The researchers were able to support their hypothesis based on a statistical test of significance, but a significance test was inappropriate because the sample was not random and the population was unknown.

In addition to the above, all the subjects in the sample were undergraduate students from various introductory classes who had volunteered for the experiment. The very real possibility exists that some, perhaps most, of the subjects were students of the researchers. If this was indeed the case, it is not known to what extent the findings could have been influenced by such factors as (1) status and power differentials; (2) the subject's fear of self-disclosure because of his relationship with the researchers; (3) the subject's desire to "help" the researchers by "fudging" a bit on his responses; and (4) the general campus gossip concerning the
researchers' academic interests, previous research, and perhaps knowledge of the research design and/or goals in this particular experiment.

Finally with respect to the sample, the fact that the subjects were not selected but were volunteers may have had some impact on the results. As Hendrick and Jones\(^1\) pointed out:

"There is a growing literature which indicates that volunteer subjects differ in certain characteristics from nonvolunteers. Volunteers tend to have higher intelligence and a higher need for social approval, among other things. Thus volunteers' motivation and ability to deduce and confirm the experimenter's hypothesis should be greater than for nonvolunteers."

Apart from problems of sample and design, major difficulties arise in terms of operationalization and measurement. The major dependent variable in Backman and Secord's study--stability and change in self-concept--was assessed by means of the subjects' self-reports on the EPPS. It is here that the authors committed perhaps an egregious conceptual error. The EPPS is an instrument designed to measure personality traits in terms of "need dispositions" (e.g., nurturance vs. dependency). Even if one accepts the validity of the EPPS (which this author does not), it may be fallacious to assume that "need dispositions" constitute one's self-concept. In any event, it is still hypothetically possible that

personality traits or "need dispositions" are of only tangential concern to an individual's self-concept with respect to particular role behaviors.

Aside from the lack of adequate operationalization, the actual measurement device (the EPPS) is also fraught with problems. The EPPS is composed of fifteen forced-choice type paired statements of needs. At best, this represents an incomplete inventory of potentially relevant factors. There is the very real possibility that the subjects experience frustration at having to represent themselves with such an incongruent and limited instrument. As Wylie\textsuperscript{1} pointed out:

"... it seems that subjects may resent a format which restricts them to ranking the applicability of traits which seem to them to be equally self-descriptive or equally nondescriptive of self. Such resentment could lead to careless, unreliable, [and] hence invalid responding."

An additional and perhaps more serious problem associated with the EPPS has to do with the fact that some response categories may be viewed by the subject as being socially undesirable. Phillips\textsuperscript{2} has made strong arguments that the research situation is like other social situations in which people engage in conscious distortions and impression management in order to appear in the best possible light.


Rosenberg\(^1\) coined the term "evaluation apprehension" to indicate the subject's concern about being assessed in terms of his adequacy as an individual. Fear of negative evaluation may stimulate the subject to give inaccurate responses in order to be favorably evaluated. Unfortunately, the ground-breaking and sociologically important research by Backman and Secord did not consider ways of invalidating or neutralizing the possible negative effect of social desirability. Furthermore, Wylie\(^2\) contended that subjects can readily discern which item of the paired statement on the EPPS has the higher social desirability value. She stated:

"... the EPPS uses a forced-choice format which requires the subject to choose one item within each pair of items when the pairs represent different 'needs' ... but it has been shown that this does not eliminate the ability of the subjects to find and choose the more socially desirable item of the pair if he so desires."

In addition to these problems, there are several aspects of Backman and Secord's research design which merit further criticism. For one thing, the sociological literature--particularly in relation to self-concept research--contains a plethora of discussions indicating the potential importance of variables such as race, SES, and sex. Not only did their study fail to control for these variables, but it did not

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\(^2\)Wylie, op. cit., p. 59.
take them into account in outlining the limitations of their generalizations.

Also, though the independent variable was the degree of consensus among significant others, there was a failure to determine the relative importance of various generic categories of significant others (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) to the individual. Their study could have been enhanced had they considered these factors and if it had been a longitudinal rather than a cross-sectional study.

Another general criticism of Backman and Secord's study has to do with their use of deception in the data collection phase. While the success of the study was largely contingent upon supposedly deceiving the subjects, inadequate measures were taken to determine whether or not the subjects had actually been fooled. While the authors contended that they were successful in their deception because of "the loud sighs of relief that arose when the subjects learned that they had been deceived with respect to the assessment,"¹ they did not employ any systematic and thorough postexperimental inquiry to determine if the subjects were indeed fooled. In reviewing the literature on the effectiveness of deception techniques in experimental research, Wylie² concluded that "even under relatively ideal conditions, postexperimental inquiries

¹Backman, Secord, and Pierce, op. cit., p. 107.
²Wylie, op. cit., p. 34.
overestimate the degree to which the deception techniques had the desired effects of fooling subjects." In addition, the use of deception raises certain ethical questions with respect to the subject's rights and the degradation of human relations. Wylie\(^1\) summed up her feelings concerning deception as follows: "The very common use of deception not only presents severe ethical problems but a widespread suspicious attitude among supposedly naive S's with resultant unknown implications for all aspects of S's behavior, including self-report behavior." Concomitantly, the research by Backman and Secord, like much experimental research, fails to really consider the "demand characteristics" of the research situation. As Hendrick and Jones\(^2\) stated:

"Most subjects do have the idea that the experimenter is trying to prove something, and they very often view their task in terms of 'helping' the experimenter find what he is looking for. In a sense, then, the experiment becomes a project in problem-solving for the subject. He views his task as trying to determine the true purpose of the experiment, and to respond in a manner which will support the hypothesis. Therefore, all the cues which convey an experimental hypothesis to a subject become significant determinants of his behavior. Orne (1962) has called the sum total of such cues the demand characteristics of the experimental situation. Demand characteristics include such things as campus scuttlebutt about the experiment, the nature of the experimental setting, the experimenter and his behavior, and the explicit and implicit communications between experimenter and subject during the experiment. Each aspect of the situation may provide a source of cues which convey the hypothesis in whole or in

\(^{1}\)ibid. \(^{2}\)Hendrick and Jones, op. cit., p. 53.
part to the subject. Therefore, in any experimental situation the subject's behavior is jointly determined by some combination of the experimental variables and demand characteristics."

In light of these methodological difficulties, the potential theoretical utility of Backman and Secord's work has not been realized. In the opinion of this writer, these researchers may not have measured social reality but perhaps imposed upon the social world techniques that actually generated their own data. Perhaps a correspondence between "what is" and what was "measured" is purely coincidental. Thus, the purpose of this investigation will be to provide more valid and concrete empirical evidence to test the theory posited by Backman and Secord and to offer a greater measure of theoretical elaboration and clarification of their model. Specifically, the main goal of this study will be to assess the cumulated and isolated impact of various groups of others on stability and change in self-conceptions among students.

Theoretical Background

Ever since Descartes' dictum of self-consciousness—"I think, therefore I am"—many students of human behavior have endeavored to reveal and understand the dynamics of self. Indeed, diverse groups ranging from artists and actors to philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have each made unique contributions toward a more complete understanding of the numerous factors which constitute one's characterizations
of self. Social scientists in particular have expressed interest in the idea of a "self" or "self-concept" as a theoretical tool for the explanation and prediction of human behavior. Although many social scientists have attempted to incorporate it into their theoretical models, there is no precisely delineated and universally accepted definition of one's self-characterizations extant in the literature. For example, the conceptual disparity between terms such as "unitary self" and "multiple self" has resulted in a certain degree of theoretical confusion. Furthermore, the interchangeability of terms such as "self," "self-concept," "self-esteem," and "self-regard," plus the reference to self-conceptions as both trait and as process, has also contributed to this lack of conceptual clarity. In light of this situation, the need to clarify and expand our understanding of human self-conceptions as a general theoretical construct seems a justifiable and desirable research goal.

The general theoretical orientation most relevant to this research is symbolic interactionism in the Median tradition. Essentially, Mead argued that humans are unique...

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2James, op. cit.; Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, op. cit.
4Mead, op. cit.
because of their ability to see themselves as objects by taking the point of view of others. More specifically, Mead viewed the "self" as an empirical reality, social in nature, which emerged when the individual learned to make characterizations ("self-indications") about himself by "taking the role of the other." This essentially reflexive capacity of humans enables the individual to consciously construct his behavior rather than simply release it. For Mead, the "self" and the larger society were interrelated such that the individual was neither isolated from, nor completely determined by, any abstract system. Mead\(^1\) stated:

"The self arises in conduct, when the individual becomes a social object in experience to himself. This takes place when the individual assumes that attitude or uses the gesture which another individual would use and responds to it himself or tends to so respond. . . . The child gradually becomes a social being in his own experiences and he acts toward himself in a manner analogous to that in which he acts toward others."

Concomitantly, Mead contended that humans are qualitatively different from lower animals in their ability to take into account their environment, both physical and social. According to his formulations, humans utilize significant symbols (primarily language) which allow them to respond to the intentions of others and therefore assign meaning to themselves and the world about them. The meaning of any given object, including one's "self," is determined in large

\(^{1}\)loc. cit., p. 125.
part by its functional relationship to other objects in the environment. Thus, for Mead, the characterizations and meanings one holds for one's "self" largely reflect one's perceptions of the intentions of others. Subsequent arguments have been advanced that these characterizations or conceptions of self tend to affect one's plans and direct one's behavior.¹

In conjunction with Mead's writings, Cooley's² discussion of the "looking-glass self" was also of crucial significance in revealing the importance of social others and the reflexive nature of one's self-characterization. He stated:

"As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

"A self-ideal of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves


²Cooley, op. cit., p. 184.
us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind."

Despite the acumen of theorists such as Cooley and Mead, considerable disparity of thought exists concerning the nature and development of self. In part, this disparity is due to the different social scientific and theoretical traditions out of which people operate. For example, much of the early personality theory stemming from Freud fostered an implicit assumption that the "self" is essentially a static phenomenon that may in fact be crystallised early in childhood. Similarly, some have conceived of "self" in terms of subconscious or innate components which may become manifest as the individual develops. Maslow\(^1\) argued that the self is realized through the gradual unfolding of a basic constitutional make-up. Specifically, Maslow postulated that the individual possesses an inborn motive to develop his potentialities to the point of "self-actualization." Snygg and Combs\(^2\) viewed the "self" as a function of the interplay between the external and internal forces, often known only intuitively, which characterize man's social existence. In a recent book, Duval and Wicklund\(^3\) asserted that the "self"


is essentially an innate component of man's being. They stated:

"Just as a person is innately capable of the awareness of various things in his environment, he is innately capable of this object that is his self. . . .

"The self is not an entity that is developed or comes into being through taking the other's viewpoint, nor is it a subjective phenomenon accessible only to the individual. Instead, self is an object-like entity that exists from the moment that person is conscious of internal and external stimuli."

Although there may be some measure of heuristic utility to these perspectives, as a general theoretical orientation they do not sufficiently explain the complex cognitive and affective processes associated with the development of one's self-characterizations. First of all, theories of this sort depend heavily on a seldom clarified or defined phenomenon commonly referred to as introspectionism, with little or no supporting empirical evidence. In addition, the relative importance of social others has not adequately been taken into account by these theories. This is especially true of those theories which account for self-characterization in terms of innate or fixed characteristics. In addition, one criticism of these theories is that they tend to be reductionistic, breaking down when attempting to predict human behavior. Another criticism is that there is an inability to explain changes in the way a person conceives of himself in different situations and at different times.

To be sure, virtually all theorists--regardless of their
orientation—view acts of self-characterization as being an important component of human behavior. It is a basic assumption in this study that any theory which attempts to explain the nature of these self-characterizations should contain at least two basic elements. First, it must clearly define what these "self-conceptualizations" are and how they came into being, and second, it must discern the mechanisms by which a person maintains and/or changes his self-conceptions. In terms of origins, this study is essentially based on the work of such theorists as Mead and Cooley, who maintain that self-conceptions are social in nature, arising out of interactional patterns in which the individual locates himself with respect to a social frame of reference provided by others whose evaluations are important to him. As such, the individual's perceptions of the way others are evaluating him are of paramount import in affecting his conceptions of self and in affecting his behavior. It is further argued that not everyone will have equal influence in shaping the way an individual conceives of himself—the perceived evaluations of some being of particular significance to the individual. Sullivan, long ago, coined the term "significant others" in reference to those people who are especially important to a given individual's social existence. As Kinch, among others, has pointed out, there are at least

\[1\text{Kinch, op. cit.}\]
three basic postulates to this theoretical orientation:

1. The individual's self-conceptions are based on his perception of the way others are responding to him.

2. The individual's self-conceptions function to direct his behavior.

3. The individual's perception of the responses of others toward him reflect the actual responses of others toward him.

While the present study does not necessarily reject the possibility of subconscious dimensions of one's self-conceptualizations, this study will be concerned only with the socially mediated aspects of self-conceptualizing behavior as suggested in the above theoretical postulates.

As previously stated, there has been considerable confusion over the nature of self-conceptualizing behavior. While some theorists (Maslow and Rogers) have argued that humans possess as a trait a general self-concept, other theorists (Brookover and Erickson) contend that humans do not have a self-concept but, rather, display self-conceptualizing behaviors. This latter perspective tends to imply a much more dynamic process in which one's self-definitions can vary from situation to situation. Indeed, James long ago argued this point when he stated: "Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." This is a particularly important viewpoint because

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1James, op. cit., p. 180.
it hints at the notion of role-specific self-definitions. Subsequent theorists have also argued that humans have as many self-conceptions as they have social roles.1 As Brookover2 stated:

"... the individual self is not perceived as a unity but as a process by which the individual identifies and characterizes himself as a social object in relation to each social situation or social role within which he behaves. ... The social context includes the person's perception of the social roles in which he is behaving and his evaluation of himself in these roles."

In addition, within any given role an individual may have differing characterizations of self for the various sub-roles in which he is engaged. For example, within the context of a student role an individual might think of himself as being good at history, bad at mathematics, etc. From the view of this author, this perspective represents a significant improvement over those theories that view self-conception as if it were a unitary or trait-like phenomenon which exists apart from specific behavioral contexts. While this author does not deny the possibility of a "generalized self-concept," this investigation will be concerned only with the cognitive components of self-conceptualizing behavior within a role-specific context (i.e., the role of student).

1 Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, op. cit.; Kinch, op. cit.; Brookover and Erickson, Society, Schools, and Learning, op. cit.

Despite the fact that there has been considerable dis-
cussion among various theorists concerning the nature and
development of one's self-definitions, there exists a paucity
of literature dealing specifically with stability and change
in conceptions of self. In order to better comprehend the
mechanisms associated with stability and change in the way a
person thinks of himself, a brief discussion of cognitive
balance or consistency theory would be helpful. Essentially,
it is argued that humans display a characteristic tendency
to organize their thoughts and behaviors in a congruent or
consistent fashion. For example, if we like someone, we tend
to attribute favorable qualities to him or her and reject the
suggestion that he or she may display undesirable traits.
Indeed, Heider's\textsuperscript{1} theory of balance and Festinger's\textsuperscript{2} theory
of cognitive dissonance both argue that humans actively
attempt to achieve consistency among cognitive elements such
as opinions, beliefs, attitudes about one's self and one's
behavior, etc. Festinger in particular was instrumental in
pointing out that the existence of dissonance among two or
more cognitive elements gives rise to pressures to reduce
that dissonance. These efforts to reduce dissonance are

\textsuperscript{2}Festinger, L., \textit{A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance}. Evanston, Ill.: Row and Peterson, 1957.
related to cognitive and/or behavioral changes. Thus, as Secord\(^1\) pointed out:

"There are two basic ideas underlying all consistency theories. The first of these is that certain cognitive elements have a logical relation to each other, and others do not. The second is that a logical inconsistency between two related elements is apt to be disturbing and to lead to attempts to resolve it."

The reader should keep these general ideas in mind in light of the subsequent discussion of self-conceptualization.

The relatively small amount of available literature which deals directly with the question of stability and change in self-conceptions is primarily the result of the combined theoretical efforts of Secord and Backman\(^2\) in the early 1960's. Prior to this time, efforts to explicate the structure of one's self-conceptions failed to clearly specify the organization of these cognitions in terms of stability and change over time, with little or no empirical research to test the proposed theoretical premises. Building upon existing theory of cognitive consistency, Secord and Backman attempted to explicate an interpersonal theory of self in which the individual is an active agent in endeavoring to maintain congruency among the components associated with

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\(^2\)Secord and Backman, "Personality Theory," op. cit.; Secord and Backman, Social Psychology, op. cit.; Backman, Secord, and Pierce, op. cit.

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one's self. Other theories, they argued, assume that humans possess a personality structure that is a constant, ultimately resulting in behavioral stability. The assumption of a rigid personality structure, according to Secord and Backman,\(^1\) has two consequences:

"The first is that continuity in individual behavior is not a problem to be solved; it is simply a natural outcome of the formation of a stable [personality] structure. The second is that either behavior change is not given attention, or change is explained independently of stability. Whereas behavioral stability is explained by constancy of structure, change tends to be explained by environmental forces and fortuitous circumstances. A more parsimonious approach would be to account for both stability and change by means of a single set of explanatory principals."

In order to achieve a greater measure of conceptual parsimony and overcome the limitations of previous theories, Secord and Backman have developed what they refer to as "interpersonal congruency theory." Essentially, this theory discards the assumption that the only source of stability in individual behavior resides in intra-personal structures. Antithetically, they asseverate that the locus of both stability and change resides in the interaction process. According to Secord and Backman, stable patterns in the interaction process are a function of two major sources. On the one hand, there are cultural, normative, and institutional forces (e.g., the structure of role relationships) which lend

\(^1\)Secord and Backman, "Personality Theory," op. cit., p. 22.
constancy to the behavior of individuals over time. Although these social structural factors are recognized as being important, they do not constitute the main focus of interest in studies by Secord and Backman and in this investigation. Rather, Secord and Backman\(^1\) attempt to account for both stability and change in terms of an interpersonal matrix comprised of three main components:

"... an aspect of the self-concept of the subject(s), S's interpretation of those elements of his behavior related to that aspect, and S's perception of related aspects of the other person(s) with whom he is interacting. An interpersonal matrix is recurring functional relation between these three components."

In this matrix, the assumption is made that the individual actively attempts to maintain a state of congruency between these three components. A state of congruency exists when the behaviors of the individual and others "imply a definition of self-congruent with relevant aspects of his self-concept."\(^2\) Accordingly, Secord and Backman argue that the individual may employ various techniques or mechanisms for maintaining his interpersonal environment so as to maximize congruency. Secord and Backman\(^3\) refer to these techniques as "stabilizing mechanisms in interaction," which include:

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\(^1\)loc. cit., pp. 22-23.

\(^2\)Secord and Backman, Social Psychology, op. cit., p. 529.

\(^3\)Backman, Secord, and Pierce, op. cit., p. 25.

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"1. **Selective interaction with O's.**

"2. **Selective evaluation of O's.** S tends to maximize congruity by altering the evaluation of selected O's in a positive or negative direction, depending on whether they are behaving congruently or incongruently with certain aspects of self. . . . Thus, S tends to increase his liking for O's who behave toward him in a congruent fashion, and to decrease his liking for those who behave in an incongruent manner.

"3. **Selective comparison with aspects of O.**

"4. **Evocation of congruent responses from O.**

"5. **Misperception of O.**

"6. **Selective behavior-matching.** In interacting with a particular O, S tends to maximize congruency by selecting from his total behavioral repertory those behaviors which are most congruent with his perception of O. . . .

"7. **Misperception of own behavior.** S may misinterpret his behavior so as to achieve maximum congruency with an aspect of his self-concept and his perception of O."

It should be indicated, however, that the above stabilizing mechanisms are various ways in which congruency can be achieved by means of cognitive distortion or misinterpretation. They are not components of a matrix which is "reality-oriented" in which the individual correctly interprets or perceives his own behavior and the behavior of others toward him with respect to his self-definitions. While these techniques of distortion may be applicable in some cases, there is a longstanding theoretical tradition supported by research which stresses the fact that the large majority of individuals accurately perceive and interpret their behavior and
the behavior of others toward them in relation to their self-conceptions.\(^1\) Thus, despite their potential theoretical interest under certain circumstances, these techniques of distortion are of only peripheral concern in this discussion and therefore will not be dealt with in any analytically or empirically systematic fashion.

In addition to techniques of distortion for maintaining consistency among elements of the matrix, the individual can actively attempt to achieve congruency by selecting to engage in only certain social roles. For example, an individual may choose a particular role which allows him to interact only with a select group of others who will behave in ways that permit him to validate his definition of self. Despite this observation, it is often the case that an individual does not have sufficient power, prestige, resources, etc. to be afforded the luxury of role selection. This is especially true of the student role in which there are numerous societal forces (e.g., truancy laws) mitigating against the selection of other roles. Thus, a thorough discussion of role selection as one mode of achieving congruency is beyond the scope of this study, which deals exclusively with stability and change in self-conceptions among students. It should be pointed out, however, that social roles represent a key link in terms of the way in which social structure shapes definitions of

\(^1\)Kinch, op. cit.
self. To be sure, the social structure as reflected in various role categories partially determines such things as frequency of interaction between self and others, as well as the parameters of appropriate behavior for others in reciprocal role relationships. Thus, social structure represents one source of stability and change in one's self-conceptions, contingent, of course, upon the degree of stability or change in the structure itself and one's relative movement through the social structure. As previously indicated, however, the primary focus of this investigation is not on social structure per se, but on the components of an interpersonal matrix which can be employed to partially explain stability and change in self-conceptions over time.

According to Backman and Secord, the major mode of accounting for stability and change in self-conceptions resides in the manner in which components of one's interpersonal matrices relate to each other. They contend that, in general, people are likely to develop stable patterns of interaction with others and are likely to maintain a given set of self-definitions over time. In order for changes in self-definitions to occur, a state of incongruency or asynchronism among elements of the matrix must be experienced by the individual. Once incongruency is experienced, the individual will attempt to adjust one or more components of the matrix in order to achieve balance.

In explicating their theory, Backman and Secord place
a great deal of emphasis on the perceived evaluation of significant others in affecting stability or change in definitions of self. The greater the basis of perceived social support among significant others, the more likely an individual will maintain a particular definition of self. Backman and Secord stated:

"If a variety of significant other persons are perceived by S to agree in defining an aspect of S's self-concept congruently, their views support each other and his self-concept. If this condition were to prevail, the particular aspect of self involved would be expected to be more resistant to change than if S were to perceive less consensus among significant others."

In other words, Backman and Secord attempt to refute the assumption that a person strives to maintain his or her self-conceptions by virtue of some recondite force residing deep within one's personality. Rather, maintenance of one's self-conceptions tends to be consistent with the nature of the interaction patterns in which one is engaged. Thus, Backman and Secord's main hypothesis reads as follows:

"The greater the number of significant other persons who are perceived to define an aspect of an individual's self-concept congruently, the more resistant to change is that aspect of self."

Given the equivocal nature of the evidence employed to support this hypothesis, further research on this important issue is certainly appropriate. In addition, several crucial

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1 Backman, Secord, and Pierce, op. cit., p. 104.
2 ibid.

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questions which logically flow from this hypothesis have not yet been subject to test. Which "others" are of importance in affecting stability and change in student self-conceptions? Which group of significant others, if any, is likely to have the greatest saliency in affecting stability and change in student self-conceptions? Does the relative impact of different groups of significant others on student self-conceptions vary according to such traditional variables as the student's race, sex, and SES level? Unfortunately, the limited amount of research conducted by Backman and Secord fails to address these questions.

Although an individual's significant others are likely to vary from role to role, there is ample empirical precedent to identify parents, teachers, and peers as being of greatest importance in the lives of students. In light of this evidence, the main question becomes: Which groups in a particular individual's life have the greatest impact on student self-conceptions, and why? In the view of this writer, parents, teachers, and peers are likely to have a differential

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impact on a student's conception of self.\(^1\) If this assertion is accurate, it would be most useful to assess the cumulated and isolated impact of these groups on stability and change in self-conceptions. This author is aware of no other research which has attempted to answer this question.

Based upon the research by Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, it could be argued that parents represent the most salient group of significant others in the lives of their children and are thus likely to have the greatest measure of impact on a student's self-conceptions. The main reason why parents are likely to display the greatest degree of influence is that they have the power to exert the strongest sanctions and control the major contingencies associated with their child's performance (e.g., threat of physical punishment or withdrawal of love, financial rewards, etc.). In addition, it is possible that teachers represent the next most salient group of significant others in the lives of students in that they control such important contingencies as grades, work load, academic promotions, etc. Finally, peers may very well be at the bottom of this hierarchy in terms of an individual's self-conceptions of academic ability because peers may be less concerned with a given student's scholastic performance than with such factors as athletic ability, being a loyal friend, and so on. At any rate, these ideas are

\(^1\)Some preliminary work has been done on this issue by Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, op. cit.
still in the realm of conjecture and therefore are in need of research in order to ascertain their validity.

In sum, this investigation will attempt to accomplish three main objectives. First, the primary focus will be to empirically test Backman and Secord's major assumption that consistency in the perceived evaluations of significant others will result in stability in one's self-conceptions. Thus, the hypothesis reads:

\[ H_1 : \text{The greater the consistency in the perceived evaluations of significant others, the greater the stability in the measured aspects of one's self-concept.} \]

\[ H_{1a} : \text{The greater the inconsistency in the perceived evaluations of significant others, the greater the change in measured aspects of one's self-concept.} \]

The second objective of this study will be to determine whether or not different groups of significant others will have a differential impact on stability and change in student self-conceptions and, if so, to measure the relative impact of each group. The hypothesis reads:

\[ H_2 : \text{Changes in the measured aspects of one's self-conceptions vary according to the relative changes in the perceived evaluations of any one group of significant others.} \]

\[ H_{2a} : \text{The greater the saliency of any one group of significant others, the greater the impact of that group on one's self-conceptions.} \]

Finally, this study will attempt to determine whether or not variables such as the student's race, sex, or SES are
related to the relative impact of different groups of significant others on student self-conceptions over time. Thus, it is hoped that this investigation will provide a more complete understanding of the mechanisms associated with stability and change in student self-conceptions than has hitherto been afforded by previous research.
CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is divided into three main parts. First, the population studied, sampling procedures, and the site of the research will be discussed. The second section deals with the instruments used in measuring the major variables under investigation. The final section presents the analytic techniques employed in answering the research questions.

Population, Sample, and Site of Research

This investigation represents a secondary analysis of some longitudinal data gathered by Brookover and his associates from the academic years 1960-61 through 1965-66. All of the students in this study were selected from an original seventh-grade population of approximately 2,000 students during the 1960-61 school year. A midwestern city of nearly 110,000 was the site of the research. Though longitudinal data were collected on students from grades 7 through 12, this research is concerned only with data from grades 8 and 10. Questionnaires were administered to the students under the guidance of a trained research staff. All the students who met the following criteria were included in this study:

1. Questionnaire data were available for eighth and tenth graders.
2. Academic achievement information was available for each year.

3. All students were promoted regularly for each academic year. Students who repeated grades or who withdrew and reentered were excluded.

4. All students were participants in the regular school program. Students who were in special education programs (such as those for the retarded) and all who were in experiments designed to enhance self-conceptions during the ninth grade were excluded.

The sample was composed of 503 males and 553 females of various socioeconomic backgrounds for a total N of 1,056. Included in this figure are 77 black students.

Instrumentation

In order to measure student self-conceptions over time, the Michigan State General Self-Concept of Ability Scale (SCA) was employed. The SCA is a widely used measure of academic ability with known validity and reliability.¹ This scale consists of eight multiple-choice items designed to assess a student's conceptions of ability to achieve academic tasks as compared with others in his social system. Each item receives a value from 1 to 5, with high scores receiving the highest values (see Appendix A). Thus, student self-

conceptions of ability are operationally defined as the sum of scored responses on the SCA scale. It should be pointed out, however, that the instrument is designed for the study of aggregate data and not for drawing individual comparisons.

In an effort to establish the relative impact of a student's perceptions of how others evaluate his academic ability, three scales were utilized (see Appendix B). Each scale was composed of five multiple-choice items ranked 1 to 5, designed to parallel the SCA scale. The variables measured by these scales are as follows:

1. Perceived parental evaluations of ability (PPE)
2. Perceived friends' evaluations of ability (PFE)
3. Perceived teachers' evaluations of ability (PTE)

As in the case of the SCA scale, each of the above scales displayed a high degree of reliability and hence was considered suitable for group comparisons.¹

The socioeconomic status (SES) of each respondent was determined by using the Duncan scale, where the occupation of the student's father (or family breadwinner) was assigned a value ranging from 1 (lowest) to 100 (highest).²

¹Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, op. cit., p. 61.
²For a more elaborate description of the characteristics of the Duncan scale, see Reiss, A., Occupation and Social Status. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961.
Analytic Procedures

The data for this study were coded and stored on tape in the Western Michigan University Computer Center. In the process of analyzing the data, several procedures were employed. First, in order to make meaningful interpretations of scores between groups over time, the data were standardized into stanines. Essentially, stanine scores are composed of nine ranks which mark off a distance of one-half standard deviation along the baseline of a normal curve. Stanines can be described qualitatively as follows:

9 = Highest level
8 = High level
7 = Considerably above average
6 = Slightly above average
5 = Average
4 = Slightly below average
3 = Considerably below average
2 = Low level
1 = Lowest level

Because they are equal units which are statistically and meaningfully comparable from test to test within a battery, stanines are the best scores to use in profiling the group data in this study. As each stanine unit is based on a range of score points, the units tend to be more stable than other derived scores. According to Prescott:

"... the stanine scale has a built-in error of measurement. If one allows variation of plus and minus one stanine level as possibly attributable to chance, there is little likelihood that

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misinterpretations will arise from chance differences being considered significant. Because of their relative stability, stanines are practical units for reporting test results to parents, pupils, and the general public. Although the stanine scale contains only nine units, this grouping is sufficiently fine to enable the user to compute correlation coefficients and do other types of statistical analyses."

Once the data were converted into stanines, the respondents were divided into three categories. The first category was comprised of those who displayed no change in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10. Stability was operationally defined as plus or minus one stanine score from eighth grade to tenth grade. The second group consisted of students who increased in their self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10. Increase was operationally defined as a change of greater than one stanine score (at least one standard deviation) in a positive direction. The third group was composed of students who displayed a decrease in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10. Decrease was operationally defined as a change of more than one stanine score (at least one standard deviation) in a negative direction. The main rationale for dividing into groups those who indicated changes in their self-concept of academic ability was to determine whether or not, as predicted by the theory, the press for change in self-conceptions in both groups would be identical, regardless of the direction of that change.

After dividing the respondents into three groups, Pearson product moment correlations were employed to determine the
isolated and additive effects of parents, teachers, and peers on stability and change in self-conceptions. Correlations for these variables were based on stanine scores rather than raw scores. In addition, correlations were used on these variables when controlling for the possible effects of sex, race, and SES. A computer program which permitted the analysis of subjects on whom some data might be missing was used in order to include subjects who would normally have been eliminated from the analysis. As such, there is a slight variation in the total N in the several analyses. The results of these analyses can be found in Chapter III.
CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

This chapter reports the results of efforts to empirically scrutinize the theoretical notions presented in Chapter I. As previously indicated, Pearson product moment correlations and partial correlations were selected as the analytic tools to assess the aggregated data. More specifically, a series of correlations and partial correlations were calculated to determine the isolated and cumulative impact of parents, teachers, and friends on stability and change in student self-conceptions of academic ability.

Basic to the social psychological theory underlying this research is the idea that the perceived evaluations of significant others will have an impact on student self-conceptions. In addition, it was suggested that various groups of significant others may in fact have a differential impact on student self-concept of academic ability (SCA). Table 1 presents the yearly correlations between perceived parental evaluations (PPE), perceived friends' evaluations (PFE), and perceived teachers' evaluations (PTE) and SCA.

1 According to Nunnally, certain statistical measures of association do not necessarily have to correspond with interval or ratio level data. He maintains that valuable information and analytic potential can be realized through the use of correlations with ordinal level data. See Nunnally, T., Psychometric Theory. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
among males and females for each of three groups: those who 
did not change in SCA from grade 8 to grade 10, those who 
displayed an increase in SCA, and those who decreased in SCA.

TABLE 1.—Correlations between student self-concept of aca- 
demic ability and perceived evaluations of parents, friends, 
and teachers: By sex of student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
<th>Sex of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NC&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>NC = no change in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 345; female N = 420).

<sup>b</sup>I = increase in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 87; female N = 60).

<sup>c</sup>D = decrease in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 62; female N = 68).

In examining Table 1, several things are apparent. All of the correlations are relatively high and in a positive direction. Among the males who did not change in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10, PPE in grade 8 was highest at .71, then PTE (.68), and then PFE (.64). For grade 10, the correlations were higher than for grade 8:
PTE, .80; PPE, .77; and PFE, .76. For females who did not change in SCA, the correlations were very similar to those of the males. However, the correlations of PPE were slightly higher for grades 8 and 10 (.75 and .79) than were the correlations for PTE (.73 and .76) and PFE (.66 and .77). It is interesting to note that for both males and females, the correlation for each group of significant others in grade 10 was higher than were those in grade 8.

When the group of students who did not undergo changes in SCA is taken as a whole (Table 2), the same general pattern appears. All the correlations are relatively high and in a positive direction. For grade 8, the highest correlation is for PPE at .73, then PTE (.70), then PFE (.65). In grade 10, the correlations for PPE and PTE are highest (both at .78), with PFE being slightly lower (.77). The correlations for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
<th>No Change (N = 765)</th>
<th>Increase (N = 147)</th>
<th>Decrease (N = 130)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
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<td>Friends</td>
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<td>Grade 8</td>
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<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tenth grade are higher than the correlations for eighth grade for each group of significant others.

Based on Table 2, it appears that the effects of PPE seem to have the greatest impact on self-conceptions among those students in the "no change" group. The isolated impact of PTE tended to be less than that of PPE, and the impact of PFE was slightly less than that of PTE. Of particular significance is the fact that the largest N was for the "no change" group (N = 765), while the N for those who increased was 147 and the N for those who decreased in self-conceptions was 130. Collaterally, the associations between the perceived evaluations of significant others and SCA increased from grade 8 to grade 10 for this largest group. These findings are not surprising when one considers the theoretical formulations of Backman and Secord. Essentially, they argue within the consistency framework that stable patterns of self-conceptions are most likely to endure. If this is indeed the case, it would help to explain the large N for those who did not change in self-conceptions and the smaller N's for those who did change. In addition, this tendency toward stability may help to account for the strengthened associations between others' evaluations and student self-conceptions. Based on expectancy theory, when a person's self-conceptions are in a formative period, one would expect that the interaction patterns between self and other would tend to reinforce each other, thereby increasing the measure.
of stability over time. The data seem to fit this general interpretation.

Despite the fact that the general trend may be toward stability, a number of people did undergo changes in self-conceptions. Among those who increased in SCA, the correlations between the perceived evaluations of others and SCA were high, though not quite as high as those in the "no change" group. For males in the "increase" group during the eighth grade, the correlation for PPE was strongest at .67, then PTE (.65), with PFE dropping to .51 (Table 1). For grade 10, the correlations were nearly identical for all groups of significant others: PPE, .56; PTE, .55; and PFE, .56. Interestingly, the correlations for PPE and PTE decreased among tenth-grade males, while the correlation for PFE increased. In the case of females, the correlations were very similar to the male correlations. For grade 8, PPE was highest at .61, then PTE (.57), and finally PFE (.54). In grade 10, the associations for all groups of significant others had declined and were all very similar: PPE was highest at .56, then PFE (.52), and finally PTE (.51).

When males and females were taken together, the same general trend persisted. For grade 8, the correlations were as follows: PPE, .64; PTE, .62; and PFE, .51. For grade 10, the correlations for the three groups were very nearly identical: PPE, .56; PFE, .54; and PTE, .54. With the exception of a slight increase in the correlation for PFE, correlations

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for PPE and PTE decreased from grade 8 to grade 10. This finding may seem somewhat contrary to the theory which would suggest an increase in the correlations. However, several possible factors could explain this occurrence. First of all, there exists the ever present possibility of random error. Apart from that, it is possible that the perceived expectations of parents and teachers were already somewhat stabilized and the increase in SCA was therefore attributable to the impact of PFE or other factors. Finally, it could be that the consistency of perceived evaluations of significant others is an important operative in affecting stability or a decrease in SCA, but not in increasing SCA. At any rate, the actual decrease in correlations was relatively small; therefore, caution should be taken when attempting to provide any conclusive interpretation of this finding.

For the students who decreased in SCA from grade 8 to grade 10, the correlations tended to parallel the "no change" group. All of the correlations were relatively high and in a positive direction (Table 1). For males in grade 8, the highest correlation was for PPE (.61), then PFE (.51), and then PTE (.49). For grade 10, the correlations for all three groups were nearly the same: PPE, .74; PFE, .71; and PTE, .71. It is interesting to point out that for the males in the "decrease" group, all of the correlations displayed a substantial increase from eighth grade to tenth grade, with the correlation for PTE showing the largest increase. For
females in grade 8, the correlations were higher than for males, with PPE being the highest (.80), then PFE (.72), and then PTE (.55). In grade 10, however, the correlations for females did not exactly parallel those of the males. In fact, the high correlations for PPE and PFE remained nearly the same as in grade 8 (.80 and .73, respectively). Similar to the males, however, the correlations for PTE among females increased sharply, from .55 to .78.

When males and females were combined, the same general pattern was not altered significantly (Table 2). For grade 8, the correlation for PPE was highest (.70), then PFE (.62), and finally PTE (.52). In grade 10, the correlations more closely approximated each other with PPE at .76, PTE at .75, and PFE at .72. Perhaps the most interesting set of correlations involves the PTE from eighth grade to tenth grade. Both males and females in the "decrease" group displayed a sharp increase in the correlations for PTE from one grade to the next. This sharp increase remained when males and females were combined (.52 to .75). This rather strongly suggests that PTE may be the most important in bringing about changes in self-conceptions in a negative direction. In fact, this set of correlations is not surprising when one considers the argument made by Rosenthal and Jacobson,¹ that teachers who hold low expectations of a student may actually punish that

¹Rosenthal and Jacobson, op. cit.
student when he or she performs above the teacher's expectations. If this is the case, the student may very well devalue his or her self-conceptions in order to bring them more in line with the teacher's expectations. This process could in turn affect the evaluative process among others such as parents and friends. If indeed this phenomenon is occurring, it would help account for the increase discussed above.

In addition to attempting to determine the isolated effects of the perceived evaluations of parents, friends, and teachers on stability and change in student conceptions of self, an effort was also made to assess the cumulative impact of each group. In order to accomplish this, correlations for the additive effects of PPE + PPE, PPE + PTE, PFE + PTE, and PPE + PFE + PTE on self-conceptions were computed. The correlations for these additive effects among males and females are presented in Table 3, and the additive effects of males and females combined are presented in Table 4.

As in the case of Table 1, all of the correlations in Table 3 are high and in a positive direction. In Table 3, the differences between the correlations for males and females are negligible. This was also the case in Table 1. In addition, the same trend appeared in both Tables 1 and 3 in that the "no change" and "decrease" groups for males and females increased their correlations from grade 8 to grade 10, while the "increase" group showed a decline from grade 8 to grade 10.
TABLE 3.—Correlations between student self-concept of academic ability and cumulative impact of perceived evaluations of parents and friends; parents and teachers; friends and teachers; and parents, friends, and teachers: By sex of student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
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<td>I&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>NC&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>I&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<sup>a</sup>NC = no change in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 345; female N = 420).

<sup>b</sup>I = increase in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 87; female N = 60).

<sup>c</sup>D = decrease in self-conceptions from grade 8 to grade 10 (male N = 62; female N = 68).

Consistent with the above are the correlations found in Table 4. These correlations are very similar to those found in Table 2, with the same trends appearing. All of the correlations are high and in a positive direction. The correlations for the "no change" group are slightly higher than are those found in Table 2. In addition, the correlations for each grouping of significant others increases from grade 8 to grade 10.
TABLE 4.—Correlations between student self-concept of academic ability and cumulative impact of perceived evaluations of parents and friends; parents and teachers; friends and teachers; and parents, friends, and teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
<th>No Change (N = 765)</th>
<th>Increase (N = 147)</th>
<th>Decrease (N = 130)</th>
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Based on the data presented in Tables 3 and 4, several general points can be made. For the "no change" groups, the correlations between males and females were not substantially different. Also, the fact that the correlations for the additive effects of significant others were higher than were those for the isolated effects lends support to the argument that the greater the measure of consistency in the perceived evaluations of significant others, the greater the likelihood that stability in self-conceptions will prevail. As such, it appears that the perceived evaluations of significant others in the "no change" group feed into one another such that they are mutually reinforcing and internally consistent, resulting in a press for consistency. If indeed these perceived evaluations are mutually reinforcing, it would help to explain the
measured increase in the measure of consistency over time.

For students who increased in self-conceptions, the cumulative impact of significant others was nearly identical for males and females (Table 3). In both groups the additive effects of significant others decreased from eighth grade to tenth grade. This situation was not altered when males and females were combined, each additive category experiencing some decrease in correlations from one grade level to the next. It appears that no single combination of significant others in the "increase" groups has a substantially greater impact on self-conceptions than any other combination. Also, the decrease in correlations from eighth grade to tenth grade for each combination, though relatively small, is not predicted from the theory. While this could be due to error, it is possible that the theory needs to be modified to account for this anomaly. More will be said about this in a later section.

As for those in the "decrease" group in Table 3, the correlations for the combined evaluations of significant others increased from grade 8 to grade 10 for each combination. This increase tended to be fairly large for all combinations in which teachers were included. These findings persist when males and females are combined (Table 4). This finding suggests that while all groups of significant others may be involved in the processes resulting in a decrease in student self-conceptions, teachers may in fact have the most
input in this process. These data are consistent with the data for the "decrease" group presented in Tables 1 and 2.

In addressing the question of stability and change in self-conceptions, some effort was made to assess the relative influence of such traditional variables as sex, race, and SES on the processes in question. In recent years there has been a tremendous amount of rhetoric among researchers and educators concerning the differential impact of sex, race, and SES on various aspects of student life. Given the consistency framework advanced by Backman and Secord, however, there is no theoretically compelling reason to assume that the cognitive processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions will vary according to sexual, racial, or socio-economic categorization. Although these variables may or may not be important with respect to actual role-specific selfdefinitions, it has not been theoretically or empirically established that they influence the process of consistency or change in self-conceptions. In other words, it is not expected that sex, race, or SES would have any substantial impact on the process of cognitive balance associated with stability and change in student self-conceptions.

Indeed, if sex, race, and SES do not really influence this process, then one would expect that when the effects of these variables are partialled out or controlled for, the correlations would be nearly the same as those presented in Tables 2 and 4. Table 5 shows the correlations for the
TABLE 5.—Correlations between student self-concept of academic ability and isolated and cumulative perceived evaluations of parents, friends, and teachers: Student sex partialled out

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
<th>No Change (N = 765)</th>
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isolated and cumulative impact of the perceived evaluations of significant others when the effects of sex are partialled out. Even a cursory examination of Table 5 reveals that the correlations are nearly identical to those in Tables 2 and 4. This is not surprising, given the fact that very little difference was found between males and females in Tables 1 and 3. Based on the similarity between Table 5 and Tables 2 and 4, one could conclude that the student's sex does not
adequately explain the complex processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions. This interpretation is in keeping with the theory.

Table 6 presents the correlations for the cumulative and isolated impact of the perceived evaluations of significant others when the effects of race are partialled out. If race is an important variable, then one would expect that when it is controlled for, the data would be quite different than

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when not controlled for. The correlations in Table 6, however, are almost the same as those in Tables 2 and 4. Though admittedly the number of blacks in the sample is relatively small compared to the number of whites, the data suggest that the same kinds of cognitive processes occur with regard to stability and change in self-conceptions irrespective of an individual's race.

In conjunction with the above, Table 7 presents the

**TABLE 7.**—Correlations between student self-concept of academic ability and isolated and cumulative perceived evaluations of parents, friends, and teachers: Student socioeconomic status partialled out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Evaluations</th>
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<th>Decrease (N = 130)</th>
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patterns of stability and change in self-conceptions when the effects of SES are partialled out. If the self-conceptualizing processes advanced in the theory are affected by SES, one would expect the correlations in Table 7 to be considerably different than those in Tables 2 and 4. The correlations in Table 7, however, are nearly identical to those in Tables 2 and 4. This similarity tends to indicate that the mechanisms associated with stability and change in self-conceptions are not likely to be affected by the socio-economic background of the individual.

Thus far, the data have indicated that the variables of sex, race, and SES, when individually partialled out, do not have an impact on the process of stability and change in self-conceptions. If this interpretation is accurate, then the pattern should remain even when the effects of sex, race, and SES are controlled for simultaneously. In other words, the partial correlations should be nearly the same as those correlations in which sex, race, and SES are not partialled out or controlled for. Table 8 presents the correlations for the "no change," "increase," and "decrease" groups when the variables of sex, race, and SES are simultaneously partialled out. In keeping with the pattern, the correlations in Table 8 are virtually the same as those in Tables 2 and 4. Thus, Table 8 lends even stronger support to the evidence suggesting that the processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions occur independent of the variables of
TABLE 8.—Correlations between student self-concept of academic ability and isolated and cumulative perceived evaluations of parents, friends, and teachers: Student sex, race, and socioeconomic status partialled out

<table>
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<td>.59</td>
<td>.80</td>
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<tr>
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sex, race, and SES. This pattern is consistent for both the isolated and the cumulative impact of the perceived evaluations of significant others.

This chapter has attempted to provide empirical data in hopes of obtaining some answers to the issues discussed in Chapter I. Though the data presented are by no means conclusive and irrefutable, they do indicate several trends with respect to these issues. The summary, conclusions, and implications of this research will be discussed in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Theory, Methods, and Findings

The general theoretical framework guiding this research was articulated by Backman and Secord in the early 1960's. In brief review, Backman and Secord advanced a consistency model of self which attempted to account for both stability and change in self-conceptualizations as a function of interaction patterns with significant others. They argued that the processes associated with stability and with change in self-conceptions reside in the functional relations of three components of an "interpersonal matrix." This matrix consists of (1) an aspect of an individual's self-concept, that is, a given definition of self; (2) the individual's interpretation of his behavior with respect to that definition of self; and (3) the individual's perception of how relevant others are evaluating and behaving toward him.

Given the assumption that the individual attempts to achieve consistency among these components, Backman and Secord investigated the relation between the perceived evaluations of relevant others and stability and change in self-conceptions. Their research supported the hypothesis that the greater the number of significant others who are perceived
to define an aspect of self congruently, the more resistant to change is that aspect of self. However, the research conducted by Backman and Secord is fraught with methodological problems, thus leaving one to question the validity of their findings. The main goal of this investigation was to clarify, expand, and provide empirical evidence relevant to their theory, as well as to generate information of potential import to educational practitioners.

In this investigation, several main ideas were subject to empirical scrutiny. Given the equivocal nature of the research conducted by Backman and Secord, the primary focus of this study was to test the major assumption that the greater the consistency in the perceived evaluations of significant others, the greater the stability in measured aspects of one's self-concept. A second goal of this study was to determine whether or not different groups of significant others have a differential impact on stability and change in self-conceptions among students. Although the question of differential impact was considered to be of great interest in this study, research by Backman and Secord failed to address this issue. Finally, this investigation attempted to assess whether or not variables such as the student's race, sex, or socioeconomic status (SES) are related to the relative impact of different groups of significant others on student self-conceptions over time. Although there is no theoretically compelling reason to assume that race, sex, and
SES are likely to affect the cognitive processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions, these variables were included in this study because many descriptive studies have observed that race, sex, and SES are important in a variety of areas of human functioning.

In order to overcome the methodological limitations associated with the one-shot quasi-experimental design employed by Backman and Secord, longitudinal data using a much larger sample of students were analyzed in this investigation. The sample was composed of 1,056 students from a midwestern city, on whom data were available in grades 8 and 10. This research represents a secondary analysis of longitudinal data originally gathered by Brookover and his associates during the early and mid-1960's.

The Michigan State General Self-Concept of Ability Scale (SCA) was used to measure student self-conceptions over time. The SCA scale is a widely employed instrument of known validity and reliability. Three additional scales, designed to parallel the SCA scale, were utilized to assess the perceived impact of others' evaluations on each student's self-conceptions of academic ability. As in the case of the SCA scale, these additional scales have a high degree of reliability and are appropriate for group comparisons.

In order to analyze the data and make meaningful interpretations of scores over time, the data were standardized into stanine scores. Stanines are perhaps the best scores
to use in profiling group data because they allow comparisons of tests within a battery while being more stable than other derived scores. Once the data were converted into stanines, the respondents were divided into three categories: (1) those who remained stable in their self-conceptions from eighth grade to tenth grade, (2) those who increased in self-conceptions, and (3) those who decreased in self-conceptions. Correlations were computed in order to determine the isolated and additive effects of parents, teachers, and peers on stability and change in student self-conceptions. Partial correlations were also computed in order to control for the possible effects of sex, race, and SES.

After analyzing the data, several discernible trends emerged. All of the correlations were relatively high and in a positive direction. Although there was some variation both within and between groups, on the whole the correlations tended to be consistent with one another. In other words, the correlations for the perceived evaluations of significant others tended to co-vary in a fashion generally consistent with the patterns of stability and change in self-conceptions. Thus, it could be said that the data provide overall support for the theory.

Another general idea advanced in the theory and supported by the data is that stability in self-conceptions is more likely than change. In other words, once an individual has internalized certain self-definitions, these definitions tend
to be resistant to change. Though a number of people can and do undergo changes in their self-conceptions, the majority of people—as evidenced by the data—remain consistent in the way they define themselves. As such, the data are supportive of the notion that dissonance is an uncomfortable experience that most people prefer to avoid. Although dissonant situations can arise which affect self-definitions, the data indicate that both the individual and his/her relevant others are more readily inclined toward patterned relations in which the expectations for self and other are consistent over time.

In terms of the relatively small number who did experience changes in self-conceptions, the patterns were different for those who increased and those who decreased in self-conceptions. The pattern for the "decrease" group was similar to that of the "no change" group and tended to support the theory. For the "increase" group, the correlations for groups of significant others were mixed: parents and teachers dropped slightly, and friends increased slightly. Despite the fact that the scores were only slightly altered and not consistent with each other, this pattern was not predicted from the theory. Though this is possibly due to chance, it is also possible that a positive change in self-conceptions (and presumably behavior) produces a degree of inconsistency among significant others. This would suggest that the relationship between self-definitions and others' evaluations is
a two-way street, with each variable having the ability to influence the other. Although the theory may be quite accurate under certain conditions, the above interpretation implies a somewhat less deterministic view of the self-conceptualizing process. At any rate, the data are far from conclusive, and more research is necessary before definitive conclusions can be reached.

With respect to the question of which group of significant others has the greatest impact on stability and change in self-conceptions, the data reveal at least a partial answer. On the whole, the correlations for parents were higher than for other groups. The disparity between groups was greatest during the eighth grade and was reduced somewhat in the tenth grade. This suggests that parents may have the most impact on their child's self-conceptions in the pre-high-school years. As the student enters high school, however, the impact of parents, though still important, may be reduced. However, the data do suggest that parents may be the most influential group of significant others involved in providing positive evaluations and preventing a student from experiencing a negative change in self-conceptions. On the other hand, the data indicate that teachers may be most involved in the process whereby a student is presented with negative evaluations, thus resulting in negative self-conceptions. In addition, when the impact of significant others is viewed cumulatively, the correlations are greater.
than when these groups are isolated. This suggests that, overall, there is a strain toward consistency in the perceived evaluations of others. This could be considered in general support of the theory.

Finally, data were presented with respect to the relative influence of sex, race, and SES on the processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions. Correlations in which each of the variables was partialled out reveal that neither sex, nor race, nor the SES of the student has any impact on the relationship between the perceived evaluations of significant others and stability and change in self-conceptions. More specifically, there is no difference between sexual, racial, and socioeconomic groups with respect to the cognitive processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions.

It should again be pointed out that the scales employed in the data collection phase of this study have been carefully assessed to establish their validity and reliability.¹ This was not so in the case of Backman and Secord, who utilized the questionable Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS). Therefore, it is the belief of this author that the existing data are theoretically relevant and represent an appropriate test for the kinds of questions raised in this

¹A number of studies dealing specifically with the validity and reliability of these scales can be found in Brookover, Erickson, and Joiner, op. cit.
investigation. In fact, the data available for this study are better suited to test the theory advanced by Backman and Secord than the research they actually conducted over a decade ago. At any rate, this writer is not aware of any other research which has employed such extensive longitudinal data in an analysis of the dimensions or mechanisms of stability and change in self-conceptions suggested by the theory.

Implications

In light of the findings stemming from this study, several theoretical implications can be drawn. First, this investigation provides empirical evidence that the model of self-consistency developed by Backman and Secord has theoretical utility in explaining the nature of self-conceptualizing behavior. This information could have theoretical applications for evaluating various learning theories as well as practical applications for the development of strategies to enhance self-conceptions among such groups as low-achieving students. For example, one such strategy would be to incorporate parents into school efforts to raise both the self-conceptions and the achievement levels of students. This is based on the finding that parents generally have the greatest impact on the patterns associated with the self-conceptualizing processes among students, particularly in

\[1\text{ibid.}\]
the pre-high-school years. In addition to the potential benefits of increasing the self-conceptions of students, a plan of this nature might also serve the latent function of providing greater parental knowledge and input into the educational practices of the schools. Indeed, such community awareness may be an important condition for maximizing the effectiveness of educators in working with students.

In conjunction with the above, the finding that teachers may be the most influential group in providing negative feedback to students which results in decreased self-conceptions (and presumably academic achievement) could have considerable implications. In recent years, many prominent radical critics of education such as Goodman, Illich, Friedenberg, and Kozol have asserted that schools not only remove the joy from learning for many students, but may in fact engage in activities which inhibit the acquisition of skills and knowledge. While this empirical investigation is not designed as a test of the notions of these critics, the above finding does lend some support to their assertions. Perhaps there exist, in the schools and in families of students, institutionalized patterns which systematically exclude certain groups of students from entering into positive interaction situations with their teachers. Though this admittedly is in the realm of conjecture, it could nevertheless be posited as one possible, although very tentative, explanation for the negative influence of teachers found in this research.
One final implication worthy of note stems from the finding that the variables of sex, race, and SES of the student do not affect the cognitive processes associated with stability and change in self-conceptions. Although there is little theoretical basis to assume that these variables should have any impact, there exist in this society the common stereotype and descriptive findings that individuals of different sexual, racial, or socioeconomic categories display great variation in cognitive functioning. The findings of this study suggest that any perceived differences in cognitive processes may not reside within different individuals, but rather may be a function of the differential sets of expectations about individuals and groups which permeate the entire fabric of this society. To be sure, these differential expectations may actually function to create behavioral differences between individuals which are descriptive of our culture, rather than reflecting universal differences appropriate for all cultures and times.

Recommendations

This research represents an attempt to empirically assess a consistency theory of stability and change in self-conceptions developed by Backman and Secord. In addition, initial efforts were made to establish the relative impact of various groups of significant others on the process of self-conceptualization. While the findings of this study support
the hypotheses, the evidence is far from conclusive. As such, further research and theoretical clarification on the general topic of stability and change in self-conceptions would be desirable.

While this investigation focused on the self-conceptions of students from eighth grade to tenth grade, additional research might examine the self-conceptualizing process of students at various age/grade levels. Perhaps further theoretical and empirical work could utilize this study in increasing our knowledge of strategies for enhancing positive self-definitions and school-related values. In addition to examining the perceived evaluations of significant others, structural conditions within the school such as institutionalized power relations should be studied as possibly accounting for student attitudes and behaviors in relation to academic life. Similarly, parallel research could be conducted on the acquisition of self-definitions and school-related values among teachers and principals. While such research could have tremendous practical importance for improving the educational quality of our schools, very little research has been conducted which specifically examines teachers and principals in this fashion.

In addition to the above, further research could investigate the effects of the degree to which various groups of significant others value academic-oriented values and behaviors among students. As was recently pointed out by
Bilby, "The occurrence of a given value orientation toward education held by a significant other and a given degree of intensity with which that value orientation is held might affect the decisions made by a student, over and above the effects of the given value orientation alone." Thus, it is quite possible that the intensity or degree of a given value configuration among particular significant others might help to account for their relative impact on the behavior and self-conceptualizations of a given student.

Given that this research represents a secondary analysis of longitudinal data, it would be useful to collect new data on the specific issues dealt with in this study. In light of the multifarious changes that have been and still are occurring in the structure of the family and of the schools, continued research could be of theoretical and pragmatic value to social scientists, students, family members, and educational practitioners.

Finally, the theory and research presented here could also be applied to a variety of institutional settings. Studies of job satisfaction, employee-employer relations, worker productivity, and so on could utilize the theoretical insights of this study. Furthermore, research could be conducted on the relation between labeling, conceptualization of self, and the development of deviant careers. Studies by

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1Bilby, op. cit., p. 115.
Goffman in the area of mental health represent one example of such research. The theory and research presented here could even be employed in efforts to understand the repulsion or attraction patterns of individuals to groups, as well as patterns of conflict between and within groups. While many of the above recommendations are very general, it is believed that this investigation could have specific applications in each of these areas.

In conclusion, it is this author's view that the theoretical scheme and empirical data presented in this research represent valuable information in understanding the nature of human self-conceptualizations and interaction. Additional studies could be built upon this research which would make further contributions to social scientific theory and educational practice. Ultimately, such knowledge could be employed to increase the levels of output among various groups and to further stimulate positive human relations between groups within academic and other settings.

\footnote{Goffman, op. cit.}
SELF-CONCEPT OF ABILITY—GENERAL*
(FORM A)

Michigan State University
Bureau of Educational Research

Circle the letter in front of the statement which best answers each question.

1. How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with your close friends?
   a. I am the best.
   b. I am above average.
   c. I am average.
   d. I am below average.
   e. I am the poorest.

2. How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your class at school?
   a. I am among the best.
   b. I am above average.
   c. I am average.
   d. I am below average.
   e. I am among the poorest.

3. Where do you think you would rank in your class in high school?
   a. Among the best.
   b. Above average.
   c. Average.
   d. Below average.
   e. Among the poorest.


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4. Do you think you have the ability to complete college?
   a. Yes, definitely.
   b. Yes, probably.
   c. Not sure either way.
   d. Probably not.
   e. No.

5. Where do you think you would rank in your class in college?
   a. Among the best.
   b. Above average.
   c. Average.
   d. Below average.
   e. Among the poorest.

6. In order to become a doctor, lawyer, or university professor, work beyond four years of college is necessary. How likely do you think it is that you could complete such advanced work?
   a. Very likely.
   b. Somewhat likely.
   c. Not sure either way.
   d. Unlikely.
   e. Most unlikely.

7. Forget for a moment how others grade your work. In your own opinion, how good do you think your work is?
   a. My work is excellent.
   b. My work is good.
   c. My work is average.
   d. My work is below average.
   e. My work is much below average.

8. What kind of grades do you think you are capable of getting?
   a. Mostly A's.
   b. Mostly B's.
   c. Mostly C's.
   d. Mostly D's.
   e. Mostly E's.
Circle the letter in front of the statement that best answers each question.

Parental Evaluations

Please answer the following questions as you think your PARENTS would answer them. If you are not living with your parents, answer for the family with whom you are living.

1. How do you think your PARENTS would rate your school ability compared with other students your age?
   a. Among the best
   b. Above average
   c. Average
   d. Below average
   e. Among the poorest

2. Where do you think your PARENTS would say you would rank in your high-school graduating class?
   a. Among the best
   b. Above average
   c. Average
   d. Below average
   e. Among the poorest

3. Do you think that your PARENTS would say you have the ability to complete college?
   a. Yes, definitely
   b. Yes, probably
   c. Not sure either way
   d. Probably not
   e. Definitely not
4. In order to become a doctor, lawyer, or university professor, work beyond four years of college is necessary. How likely do you think your parents would say it is that you could complete such advanced work?

a. Very likely  
b. Somewhat likely  
c. Not sure either way  
d. Somewhat unlikely  
e. Very unlikely

5. What kind of grades do you think your parents would say you are capable of getting in general?

a. Mostly A's  
b. Mostly B's  
c. Mostly C's  
d. Mostly D's  
e. Mostly E's

Teachers' Evaluations

Think about your favorite teacher: the one you like best, the one you feel is most concerned about your schoolwork. Now answer the following questions as you think this teacher would answer them.

1. How do you think this teacher would rate your school ability compared with other students your age?

a. Among the best  
b. Above average  
c. Average  
d. Below average  
e. Among the poorest

2. Where do you think this teacher would say you would rank in your high-school graduating class?

a. Among the best  
b. Above average  
c. Average  
d. Below average  
e. Among the poorest

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3. Do you think that this TEACHER would say you have the ability to complete college?
   a. Yes, definitely
   b. Yes, probably
   c. Not sure either way
   d. Probably not
   e. Definitely not

4. In order to become a doctor, lawyer, or university professor, work beyond four years of college is necessary. How likely do you think this TEACHER would say it is that you could complete such advanced work?
   a. Very likely
   b. Somewhat likely
   c. Not sure either way
   d. Somewhat unlikely
   e. Very unlikely

5. What kind of grades do you think this TEACHER would say you are capable of getting?
   a. Mostly A's
   b. Mostly B's
   c. Mostly C's
   d. Mostly D's
   e. Mostly E's

Friends' Evaluations

Please answer the following questions as you think your FRIENDS would answer them.

1. How do you think your FRIENDS would rate your school ability compared with other students your age?
   a. Among the best
   b. Above average
   c. Average
   d. Below average
   e. Among the poorest

Go on to the next page
2. Where do you think your FRIENDS would say you would rank in your high-school graduating class?
   a. Among the best
   b. Above average
   c. Average
   d. Below average
   e. Among the poorest

3. Do you think that your FRIENDS would say you have the ability to complete college?
   a. Yes, definitely
   b. Yes, probably
   c. Not sure either way
   d. Probably not
   e. Definitely not

4. In order to become a doctor, lawyer, or university professor, work beyond four years of college is necessary. How likely do you think your FRIENDS would say it is that you could complete such advanced work?
   a. Very likely
   b. Somewhat likely
   c. Not sure either way
   d. Somewhat unlikely
   e. Very unlikely

5. What kind of grades do you think your FRIENDS would say you are capable of getting?
   a. Mostly A's
   b. Mostly B's
   c. Mostly C's
   d. Mostly D's
   e. Mostly E's
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