

SELF- UNDERSTANDING IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

William Damon and Daniel Hart



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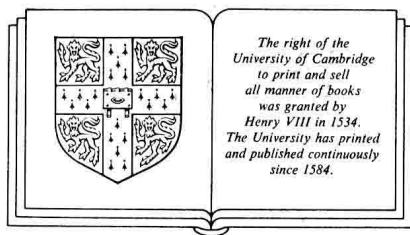
Self-understanding in childhood and adolescence

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**Self-understanding in childhood
and adolescence**

Preface

This book reports the results of a six-year investigation into the development of self-understanding. It represents a collaborative effort in which the two authors joined to explore the self-conceptions of children and adolescents from a developmental perspective. We had been troubled by a nondevelopmental bias in prior self-concept research and wished to take a new look at this central area of social cognition. In so doing, we extended a research program on children's social-cognitive development that began with studies described in *The Social World of the Child* (Damon, 1977). In the present investigation we took as our main concern the cognitive aspects of personal identity. We also expanded the age range of study to include early and late adolescence as well as childhood.

We consider the present work to be a necessary complement to the initial work on social understanding. *The Social World of the Child* explored children's understanding of the social relations and regulations that define their participation in society. The focus was on friendship and authority (childhood's key peer and parental relations), justice, social rules, and conventions of sex role and etiquette. These relations and regulations are the integrating forces of children's social life, the interpersonal fabric of their social networks. The present book explores the opposite side of the social coin.

As children work out their social relations and standards of conduct, they also distinguish themselves from others as a means of establishing the unique bases of their own individuality. This requires sorting out for themselves both the general and the particular features of their own personal identities. Psychologically this task is as much a requirement of "personhood" as is the more other-oriented process of social understanding. Efforts to distinguish oneself from others are implemented cognitively by self-understanding. Social understanding and self-understanding, then, are the two complementary intellectual functions implicit in social development.

The complementarity of social understanding and self-understanding is

an interpenetrating one in which the two constantly inform one another. Social relations by definition include the self, and one's view of any social transaction is colored by how it affects one's self-interest. Likewise, self-understanding is to some extent based on one's observations of the self in relations to others, and it also owes a large debt to one's perceptions of others' attitudes toward oneself. But the overlap between social and self is by no means complete. There are many social realities external to the self that one must grasp in order to function socially. Conversely, one's sense of self-identity always retains a privileged core of personal experience and belief that no social influence can fully determine.

Our hope is that the social and self-understanding studies, when taken together, will sketch a rounded (though still preliminary) picture of both social-cognitive functions as they develop. Between the two investigations, the first author wrote a more general account of children's social development that sets these social-cognitive functions in the context of growing behavioral and affective processes (Damon, 1983a).

In the present book we encounter some complexities unique to the concept of self. For one thing, the self is more than just another social concept and cannot be contained within the differentiating function of social development. The self is relational as well as individualistic, subjective as well as objective, and multifaceted as well as unified. Such dualisms are puzzling to say the least, and they do not stop here. Above all is the almost incomprehensibly dualistic conviction on which all self-awareness rests: The self retains its essential identity over time and circumstance while potentially being susceptible to every conceivable sort of change.

Our challenge, then, was to capture such dualisms in our investigation, and to determine what they mean to the developing child and adolescent. We admit at the start that we only partially succeeded. Our approach was grounded on William James's multidimensional self theory (James, 1961/1892), in which many of the most prominent dualities (subjective-objective, stability-change) are represented in his distinction between the "me" and the "I." As we shall explain later in this book, our progress was largely confined to the "me." Nevertheless, through an approach originally suggested by Mead (1934), we did manage to make some indirect inroads into the "I" by studying it through an aspect of the "me," the understanding of core self-experiences. This beginning is at least more encouraging than that heralded by James, who himself despaired of ever studying the "I" in an empirical and nonspeculative way.

To say that there are general dualisms permeating all persons' self-awareness is not to say that all persons think about these dualisms in the same way. In fact, the central focus of this book is the regular pattern of

differences that can be traced to developmental trends in self-understanding during the childhood and adolescent years. Our aim is to describe these patterns as much on their own terms as possible, much as was done in *The Social World of the Child*, much as anthropologists strive to impart the uniqueness of a particular culture's perspective.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, just prior to outlining some radical variations in how personhood is defined across cultures, notes that the category of "person" is nevertheless a fundamental referent for everyone (Geertz, 1973). People may differ widely in their beliefs about the essence of human nature and yet still share a common orientation to humans as a special class of creature. "At least some conception of what a human individual is, as opposed to a rock, an animal, a rainstorm, or a god, is, so far as I can see, universal" (Geertz, 1973, p. 126).

Within the general class of persons, the self is yet another universal distinction. In one way or another, people everywhere accept and enforce self-grounded notions like individual responsibility, reward, and sanction. But this does not at all imply that people everywhere draw the boundaries between self and other *in the same way*. Clearly some cultures refrain from making self-other separations that seem normal, and perhaps even inevitable, to many Western cultures (LeVine and White, 1986). Such variations no doubt are guided by the general social-cultural, cognitive, and personality functions that any form of self-understanding must serve.

In this book we investigate the way in which such functions are played out in the contemporary American setting of Worcester, Massachusetts. We are aware that the self-other boundary is drawn differently elsewhere, and that this may lead to cultural variations in the nature of self-understanding as well as in its developmental trajectory through childhood and adolescence. But we also believe that the universality of self-understanding's social and personal functions will lead to some comparability across diverse settings. We have an opportunity to empirically examine this issue on a small scale in Chapter 8.

The introductory first chapter begins with a discussion of the semantic boundaries of the construct "self-understanding." We compare and contrast it to related constructs like "self," "self-concept," and "self-esteem." We offer a definition of self, drawn largely from William James and his followers, in order to establish the range of substance and experience that self-understanding deals with. This approach provides a rationale for later developmental assessments of our subjects' self-statements, in much the same way as any "task analysis" enables the assessment of cognitive problem-solving responses. In Chapter 1 we also discuss our view of why self-understanding requires its own developmental analysis. Our position

is that self-understanding poses special conceptual problems for the child quite unlike any other concept, social or otherwise. It therefore has domain-specific properties that diverge even from closely parallel concepts like the understanding of other persons. We therefore follow a “partial structure” approach to exploring this concept and its relations to other domains of knowledge. Finally, we discuss the central problem of conceptual stability in beliefs about the self, and we explain why a developmental approach can help resolve this hotly contested issue in social psychology.

Chapter 2 presents the results of a literature review of previous empirical research on self-understanding. Sources are drawn from biological, personality, and social-cognitive approaches. The purpose of this chapter is twofold – to acknowledge the body of literature that we draw on in composing our own developmental model; and to identify the contributions, omissions, and contradictions in the existing literature that make clear the issues to be addressed in the present investigation.

In Chapter 3 we explain the developmental model that we shall be testing in the remainder of the book. This multidimensional theoretical model encompasses all aspects of the self, from the self-as-subject to the self-as-object. It includes the subject’s understanding of the following self-dimensions: one’s personal characteristics; the processes by which the self is formed; one’s personal agency over future changes; one’s self-interest; and one’s self-evaluation. The model describes developmental progressions within each of these aspects of self and relates these developmental progressions to one another. The chapter discusses in detail the logic behind this model and the assessments that can be made on the basis of it.

Chapter 4 presents a new clinical interview on the self, designed for use with subjects ranging in age from early childhood to late adolescence. Techniques for administering this interview to such a broad age-range are discussed. In addition, we offer an overall discussion of the rationale for using a clinical interview approach for basic research in social-cognitive development.

In Chapter 4 we also describe our techniques for scoring the self interviews. We present selections from our coding manual and discuss principles that we used to construct the coding scheme. We also describe the guideline that we followed in coding interviews for the studies in this book. Interjudge and test–retest reliability figures for these scoring procedures are presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 5 reports results from a series of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. The focus of this chapter is the “me” aspect of self-understanding, the self conceived as object. The main database is a 4-year longitudinal study with 52 boys and girls. These children ranged in age from 4 to 14 at

the beginning of the study, and from 8 to 18 by the final testing. In addition, we have an initial cross-sectional database of 120 children in this age range. Analyses of these data reveal age trends and transitional patterns in subject's self-understanding development. Our discussion of these trends assesses how these data fit our theoretical model. We also shall discuss the implications of these data for general models of transition in social-cognitive development.

The research reported in Chapter 5, 7, 8, and 9, like almost all previous empirical work done on self-conception, focuses primarily on the self-as-object (James's "me"). This is because young subjects more readily speak about their characteristics than about such elusive issues as the self's awareness of its own agency, continuity over time, and distinctness from others, all of which comprise the self-as-subject (James's "I"). In Chapter 6, however, we present an exploratory study into how children and adolescents develop an awareness of these processes. As far as we know, this chapter presents the first systematic empirical look at developmental trends in this central component of self-understanding.

Chapter 7 explores the relation between patterns of adolescent self-understanding and two fairly prevalent mental health problems of youth. In two studies of self-understanding involving respectively a sample of anorexic girls and a sample of boys with conduct disorders, deviations from normal patterns of adolescent self-understanding were observed. Their significance to adolescent adjustment problems is discussed.

Chapter 8 presents a study of self-understanding in a Puerto Rican fishing village. To provide a cross-cultural comparison, our self-understanding interviews were translated into Spanish and given to 48 children, ages 8 through 14, living in a small fishing village on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. The interviews were then scored with our scoring manual (although one new coding category had to be devised for this sample in order to capture the full range of their statements). The results revealed a mixed pattern of similarities and differences between the Puerto Rican sample and the mainland American sample.

Developmentally, the Puerto Ricans followed the same progressions in their self-conceptions as did the mainland U.S. children, and were neither ahead nor behind the mainland children in the majority of their self-reasoning scores. They emphasized, however, aspects of the self seldom mentioned by the mainland children, such as their familial obligations and their community memberships. Further, they deemphasized characteristics that were of high priority for the mainland children, such as their psychological orientations and preferences, their comparative abilities, and their relative popularity. We draw from the anthropological literature to explain

these patterns and to identify the kinds of socialization experiences that could account for them.

In Chapter 9, the results from three studies contrasting conceptions of self with other social concepts will be discussed. In the first study, moderate empirical associations are established between self-understanding and the social concepts studied in *The Social World of the Child*. In the second study, self and other interviews were given to 40 boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 10 years. Self and other interviews were scored by comparable criteria drawn from the self scoring manual. The pattern of results revealed some similarities but also some striking developmental differences between the two concepts, as predicted from our theoretical model. Implications of these findings for social-cognitive development in general are drawn.

Some material in this book has appeared previously in journals and book chapters. An early version of the Chapter 2 literature review was published in *Child Development* (W. Damon and D. Hart [1982], "The development of self-understanding from infancy through adolescence," *Child Development* 53: 481–64). Portions of Chapter 5 and Chapter 9 were published in two *Social Cognition* articles (W. Damon and D. Hart [1986], "Stability and change in children's self-understanding," *Social Cognition* 4: 102–18; and D. Hart and W. Damon [1986], "Developmental trends in self-understanding," *Social Cognition* 4: 388–407). Another portion of Chapter 9 appeared in R. Leahy, ed. (1985), *The Development of the Self*, Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press (Copyright © 1985 by Academic Press). The Puerto Rican study in Chapter 8 was first reported in D. Hart, N. Lucca-Irizarry, and W. Damon (1986), "The development of self-understanding in Puerto Rico and the United States," *Journal of Early Adolescence* 6: 293–304.

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1 Introduction

Understanding oneself is a fundamental human concern that starts early and continues throughout life. The toddler searching for familiar facial features in a mirror, the teenager brooding over a friend's teasing remark, and the philosopher working through abstract verbal puzzles about personal continuity are all captured by the same intriguing problem – the nature of self. The problem attracts not only intellectual curiosity but the deepest sorts of emotional response. For a conceptual exercise, it bears more than the usual cognitive risks and rewards, for it provides the material for self-judgment and evaluation.

Thoughts and attitudes about oneself form a conceptual system that we call “self-understanding.” This system's domain encompasses all the considerations that an individual uses to define the self and distinguish the self from others. Included among these considerations may be (depending on the individual) physical and material qualities (e.g., size, possessions), activities and capabilities (e.g., hobbies, talents), social or psychological characteristics (e.g., manners, habits, dispositions), and philosophical beliefs (e.g., moral values, political ideology).

Further, self-understanding can extend beyond the definition of one's current characteristics to the consideration of one's past and future life directions. It may include notions of how one changes or remains the same over time. Included too may be conceptions of the processes accounting for personal changes, and beliefs about one's own role in shaping or guiding these processes. It even may include reflections on one's own consciousness of selfhood.

As part of its task of distinguishing self from others, self-understanding incorporates one's self-interests and how these may differ from the interests of others. Self-understanding also draws connections between the interests of self and others, defining ways in which mutual self-interests may overlap. Finally, self-understanding includes evaluative insights that provide the cognitive bases for self-esteem, shame and guilt, and personal identity.

In self-understanding, however, unlike other conceptual systems, the self must do the understanding of itself. This situation leads us commonly to make reflexive statements like "I am mad at myself," or "I don't know myself very well." In such seemingly contradictory dualisms, "I" and "myself" are both part of the same "self" that is being understood. As we shall see, philosophers like William James developed intricate schemes to deal with this unique complexity.

Such complexities in self-understanding also have caused social scientists to take some problematic routes exploring this fundamental psychological system. Some investigations have chosen to conflate the meanings of the words self, self-concept, person, and personality, often using them interchangeably in the same analysis. Others have chosen to avoid the construct "self" entirely, denying its independent status as a construct or placing it in its own kind of black box. Because we find neither type of solution adequate for a comprehensive developmental study, we shall attempt in this introduction to draw some semantic boundaries between various related constructs of the self system.

"Self-understanding" disentangled from "self"

In its role as a cognitive organizer of one's life experience, self-understanding provides a sense of continuity across the complexities of context and changes of time. It offers a basis for considering one's jumble of personal experiences as one connected life rather than as many disconnected fragments. Not coincidentally this essential sense of personal continuity is precisely the function that has been assigned to the generic notion "self" by generations of philosophers and psychologists (Allport, 1942; Parfit, 1971; Nozick, 1981; Blasi, 1986). This raises a difficult though critical question that we must address at the outset: Is there a legitimate distinction to be made between "self" and "self-understanding"; or is there so much redundancy between the two that they should be collapsed for the sake of parsimony?

An important tradition within social psychology favors such collapsing (Sarbin, 1952; Epstein, 1973). The argument is that the notion "self" adds nothing to the notion "self-concept" (or self-understanding, as we choose to call it). This is because, the argument goes, "self" is nothing more than the theories that individuals hold about themselves. It is a cognitive-affective construction whose referent is neither observable nor verifiable by anyone else.

Social psychologists point out that the notion "self" typically refers to the personal experience of individuality. The nature of this experience,

therefore, is determined mainly by the subject, and is not matter for consensual validation. We cannot, for example, dispute the fact of a person's claiming to have a Napoleonic experience, because whether or not a person feels like Napoleon is ultimately subjective. We may try to persuade him otherwise, perhaps with some effect but perhaps not. We also can step back and objectively determine that the person is not physically the same person as Napoleon, and even that he has a different personality than Napoleon. These are matters for which we can assemble objective evidence. But the self remains a personal construction. Others may offer feedback but cannot determine how the feedback will be interpreted or incorporated.

Because individuals have final definitive power over the natures of the self-experience, many social psychologists believe that self should be treated as nothing but a constructed psychological concept. Just as we have concepts of the weather, of clothing, of love, we have concepts of self. But unlike other concepts, self-concept remains in essence wholly personal and individually defined. Therefore, the referent of self-concept (the self) is no more than the individual's cognitive representation of it. As psychologists, the argument goes, our best choice is to study this cognitive representation (the self-concept) and dispense with the invented (or, at any rate, the redundant) referent (the self).

Sarbin (1962) has been a leading advocate of this position, now widely shared in the social-science community. His position is that the notion of self plays an essential role in organizing our personal experience for us, just as any concept enables us cognitively to manage some segment of the world. Treating "self" in these terms means focusing on the representation rather than the referent. When we analyze human conceptions of God, for example, we need not argue about the nature of God, or even about whether God exists. A similar approach can be used in a psychological analysis of self. In an influential statement, Sarbin wrote:

The interbehavioral field of the human can include perceptions and cognitions referable to objects in the external world, and perceptions and cognitions referable to his own body, his own statuses, and so on. . . . The self is one such cognitive structure or inference. . . . The self (in common with other cognitive structures) is subject to continual and progressive change, usually in the direction from low-order inferences about simple perceptions to high-order inferences about complex cognitions. (Sarbin, 1962, p. 12)

As a scientific approach, Sarbin's position has obvious advantages in practicality and parsimony. Considering the self to be no more than a concept avoids the problem of trying to study those other aspects of self (if they exist) that may be unobservable. Philosophers have long recognized this problem. Early in the eighteenth century, Hume wrote: "For myself,

when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception" (Hume, 1738/1978, p. 252). Hume's statement anticipates a tradition of social theorists (William James for one) who, whatever their beliefs about the nature of self, despaired of ever capturing its essence in a scientifically objectifiable manner.

From our own viewpoint, Sarbin's strategy of collapsing self and self-concept provides a convenient approach, because our experimental interest in any case lies solely in the latter. But, however convenient, this approach comes with certain blinders that must inevitably limit the investigatory vision. The main problem is that, in any strategy where a concept is examined apart from its referent, there can be no true index of the concept's adequacy. That is, if we have absolutely no independent notion of what a "self" is (or even if it exists), how can we determine the quality of an individual's cognitive representation of self? This problem is especially acute for a developmental analysis, where comparisons of adequacy must be made and progress assessed.

The Sarbin solution, as indicated in the quoted excerpt, is to use very general and abstract terms ("high-order"; "complex") to accomplish developmental comparisons of self-concepts. Such terms can be used as an index of any sort of developmental change, from that in cellular systems to that in social organizations. In our own writings on social cognition, we have always opposed such an approach (Damon, 1977, 1979, 1983; Hart and Damon, 1986). Like many other developmental psychologists today, we believe that more is learned from analyses that focus on the special conceptual problems posed by the variety of domains, social and cognitive, that constitute human knowledge (Feldman, 1980; Fischer, 1980; Turiel, 1983; Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1984).

As for the concept of self, we share Alston's objection that removing its referent distorts its true status as a concept (Alston, 1977). For the self is not exactly an invented fantasy, like a cartoon figure; nor is it an article of pure faith, like God. Rather, it is a set of experiences that people commonly report, however unreliably. Even if we decide not to study those experiences directly (a choice that we have indeed made in our own investigation), their existence endows their cognitive representations (which we do choose to study) with a core substantive reality.

These self-experiences also can provide us with guidance concerning how to explore and assess their cognitive representations in self-understanding. Accordingly, we believe that our investigation in self-understanding is bet-

ter informed by an initial consideration of the experience of self than by allowing the self to be wholly swallowed up by its conceptual manifestation.

What is self-understanding the understanding of?

If the notion of “self” cannot be confined to the self-concept, what exactly is the extent of its boundaries? We emphatically state that these boundaries do not coincide with the holistic notions of “person” or “personality.” We make this claim emphatically because we believe that a disturbing confusion in certain psychological writings, particularly within the psychoanalytic and ego psychology traditions, has been the conflating of these constructs. If “self” is to mean “person,” there is no need for it as a special construct. It can serve an important function only if it is taken to mean a unique aspect of the person not captured by any other construct.

Here we turn to the self theory of William James, still the classic psychological analysis of this elusive concept. James’s framework, with some more recent modifications to be discussed, has shaped our investigation from its inception. When we explore the self-understanding of children and adolescents, we focus in large part on their understanding of the experiential territory that James mapped out a century ago.

James divided the self into two main components, the “me” and the “I.” The “me” aspect is “the sum total of all a person can call his” (James, 1961/1892, p. 44). The primary elements of the “me” are what James called the “constituents.” These constituents are the actual qualities that define the self-as-known. They include all the material characteristics (body, possessions), all the social characteristics (relations, roles, personality), and all the “spiritual” characteristics (consciousness, thoughts, psychological mechanisms) that identify the self as a unique configuration of personal attributes.

James analyzed his three primary constituents in terms of their nature and relation to one another. His suggestion was that each individual organizes the constituents of the “me” into a hierarchical structure that assigns differential value to each of the various material, social, and spiritual constituents. James’s assertion was that all individuals hierarchize the basic constituent “me” categories similarly, with “the bodily me at the bottom, the spiritual me at the top, and the extra-corporeal material selves and the various social selves between” (p. 57).

When James writes of individuals organizing their “me” constituents into hierarchies, he is of course referring to individuals’ cognitive representations of the “me” aspect of self. This is the place of self-concept in James’s theory. As such, it presents a fairly comprehensive notion. It

suggests a self-concept that incorporates all aspects of the self that one can objectively know, either through one's own observations or through feedback from others.

For our purposes it is important to note here that this Jamesian version of a self-concept, however comprehensive, did not imply any developmental component. Although James admitted to some individual variation in how the "me" constituents were formulated, he did not recognize the possibility that their hierarchical interrelations might vary significantly across individuals or within one individual over time. Thus, James foresaw no need for developmental comparisons between modes of "me" organization.

James's introduction of the second major aspect of self, the "self-as-I," drives his theory deep into the heart of the self's exclusive domain. For the "I" incorporates precisely those experiential features of self that elude all other constructs. The "I" more than any other aspect of the person requires a special "self" notion to express.

The essence of the "I" is its subjectivity. This translates into an awareness of several core features of individuality, among which are: (1) an awareness of one's agency over life events; (2) an awareness of the uniqueness of one's life experience; (3) an awareness of one's personal continuity; and (4) an awareness of one's own awareness.

The power of James's theory lies in its systematic integration of these four components into a single psychological theory of the self-as-subject. As we later note, other philosophical approaches have highlighted one or the other of these self features, but few have envisioned their interconnections within the subjective experience of individual identity. For this reason, we were drawn to James's framework as our own starting point.

James presented the "I" as the "self-as-knower," the aspect of self that initiates, organizes, and interprets experience in a subjective manner. Individuals are aware of the "I" through four types of experience: agency, distinctness, continuity, and reflection (these are simply other terms for the four "awarenesses" that we just mentioned). Each of these experiences has profound consequences for the individual, particularly in creating the sense of personal identity.

From the sense of agency derives a belief in the autonomy of the self, a conviction that one actively structures and processes one's own experience. From the sense of continuity derives stability of self: As James wrote, "Each of us spontaneously considers that by 'I' he means something always the same" (p. 63). From the sense of distinctness from others derives individuality: "Other men's experiences, no matter how much I may know about them, never bear this vivid, this peculiar brand" (p. 71). From