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Adolescents' self-concept consistency and the transition from inconsistency to consistency

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of adolescents' self-concept consistency vs. inconsistency (as measured by Structural Analysis of Social Behavior, SASB; Benjamin 1974; 1994). Results from three quantitative studies show that self-concept consistency is lower among adolescents (16-20 years) in comparison to adults, that approximately 15-25% of the adolescents have an inconsistent self-concept, and that inconsistency is more common among adolescent girls than among boys. In addition, inconsistency was significantly related to a number of negative factors (e.g., suicide attempts and low satisfaction with the self). Furthermore, data from a single case study show that transitions from self-concept inconsistency to consistency are possible, and that the change of quality of interpersonal relationships may be an important factor in such a transition. Finally, this case study indicated that self-concept consistency may be more important than necessarily having a self-concept characterized by self-love in relation to quality of life.

Key words: Adolescents, (In)Consistency of self-concept, Self-concept.

Introduction

Within contemporary theories of identity development (for a review on this subject see Kroger, 2000) there are differing *theoretical* opinions on whether concepts such as unity and coherence are essential or not to the individual's sense of self and identity. Deconstructionist theories describe the self as multiple, lacking a single, integrative core and in a process of being constantly reconstructed through social interaction (cf., Horowitz, 1979; Markus, & Nurius, 1986; Rosenberg & Scara, 1985; Sampson, 1985; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). In these theories the conception of the self as an integrated whole is rejected and referred to as a parallel to the western worldview signified by governance and

authority (Sampson, 1989). Others think of self-concept development as a process of gaining self-knowledge (Baumeister, 1997), where the individual gradually integrates internal images, feelings and theories about the self into a coherent and functioning whole. Holland and Skinner (1997) speak of identity as a self-understanding that gives an ongoing point of view, situating the individual in a place that provides a view of him/herself and the world where (s)he lives. Loevinger (1976) argues that the search for coherence and meaning in experience is the essence of ego and ego functioning (see also, Loevinger, Wessler, & Redmore, 1970). Grotevant (1993), in turn, discusses identity through the narrative approach. Here, identity is viewed as a life history,

which provides the individual with coherence and a purpose to life.

Staying within the narrative approach, McAdams (1990) argues that by formulating and presenting to others a dynamic and internalized story about oneself, the individual's past, present and future become integrated. Simultaneously, this story situates the individual in a social niche and in historical time, again, expressed as providing a sense of unity and purpose to life.

Within the Eriksonian (Erikson, 1959, 1968) framework the very core of identity is, in fact, defined as a sense of continuity over space and time. Developing a coherent picture of oneself is considered the main developmental task during adolescence and a necessary foundation for further development, specifically in relation to the ability of forming intimate relationships.

In Marcia's (1966) operationalizations of Erikson's theories of identity and identity crisis, four identity statuses are discussed. Each of them (i.e., identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement) is viewed as a mode of response in terms of crisis/exploration, and present degree of commitment to intrapsychic and social demands of identity formation (Bourne, 1978). In terms of the Erikson/Marcia paradigm, a person with an unintegrated identity is described as identity diffused and, more specifically, as an individual who is "unable or unwilling to make identity defining commitments" (Kroger, 2000, p. 65). Identity diffusion has repeatedly, in a number of studies, been associated with negative aspects of development, such as low levels of self-esteem and personal autonomy, external locus of control (Kroger, 2000), and also with both emotional problems and psychopathology (Marcia, 1994).

Longitudinal studies over the years of late adolescence (Cramer, 1998; Fitch & Adams, 1983; Kroger, 1988; Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974; Waterman & Goldman, 1976) show decreases of low level statuses (i.e., diffusion and foreclosure) and increases of high statuses (i.e., moratorium and achieved). These

results indicate that a diffused identity can be considered as a sign of immaturity, in terms of personality development, but also an undesirable and sometimes pathological developmental pattern. On the contrary, exploring and forming consistent patterns of commitments to certain values, opinions, etc., are associated with healthy development and growth. That is, achievers generally score higher than the other three groups on a number of positively valued issues such as psychological well-being, cognitive complexity, academic motivation, and level of intimacy with friends (for reviews on this subject see Adams, 1999; Bourne, 1978; Kroger, 1993).

In the present article, consistency in self-concept assessments was studied in four different samples of 16-18 years old adolescents. The general assumption was, in line with what has just been said about identity diffusion, that self-concept consistency would increase by age, and that self-concept inconsistency would be associated to negative rather than positive factors. More specifically, the following four questions were asked: (a) Are there any age-related differences in terms of self-concept (in)consistency between 16 year-olds, 18 year-olds, and adults? (b) What is the general distributional pattern between consistency and inconsistency in self-concept assessments in adolescent samples? (c) Are there any relationships between (in)consistent self-concept assessments and other factors that indicate whether (in)consistency can be judged as positive or negative during this developmental stage? and finally, d) are transitions from an inconsistent to a consistent self-concept assessment during adolescence possible?

This paper presents the joint results from four different studies which all have included measures of self-concept (in)consistency, although this has not always been the specific focus of each study (Adamson, 1999a; Adamson 1999b; Adamson & Lyxell, 1996; Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999).

Method

In studies I-III (Adamson, 1999a, 1999b; Adamson & Lyxell, 1996) a personality inventory (Structural Analysis of Social Behavior, SASB; Benjamin, 1974, 1994) along with questionnaires were used. Study IV is a longitudinal interview study (first report in Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999). In the following, a brief description of the method will be presented (for full method descriptions see the original articles).

Studies I-III: Survey and cross sectional studies

Participants

Altogether 333 adolescents aged 16-18 years participated in the above studies (see Table 1). All were students from a small-town Swedish college. To obtain a representative distribution with respect to socio-economic factors, the participants were drawn from classes that aim towards higher education as well as from vocation-oriented classes. In addition, a non-clinical sample (Bodlund & Armelius, 1994) of 52 adults (females = 28, males = 24) with a mean age of 33 (range 20-56) was used in Study II (Adamson, 1999a) in order to make age comparisons between adolescents and adults.

Measures

In all studies referred to in the present article, self-concept (in)consistency has been measured by means of the SASB-INTREX Questionnaire A (Benjamin, 1983), based on the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior model (SASB; Benjamin, 1974, 1994). SASB is a circumplex model for evaluating an individual's interpersonal behavior and her (or his) internalized self-concept, also called introject. The basic assumption is that the individual's internalized self-concept is the result of introjected relationships with significant others, and the model builds on two dimensions: *affiliation* and *interdependence* (also labeled love and control/dominance; see Figure 1). The theoretical framework originates in interpersonal theory (Benjamin, 1974) which, in turn, is rooted within theories of social interaction (e.g., Sullivan, 1953; Mead, 1934).

The SASB-INTREX Questionnaire consists of 36 statements grouped into eight clusters (for item examples see Table 2), where self-ratings are made on a scale from 0-100 in increments of ten. The answer "not at all" represents 0 on the scale, and "perfectly" represents 100. Item 1 at the top of the model contains only spontaneity. Moving stepwise to the right decreases spontaneity and increases self-love and so on, in line

Table 1
Participants in Studies I-III, Quantitative Studies

Study	<i>n</i>	Females	Males
I (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996)	44	19	25
II (Adamson, 1999 a)	157	88	69
mean age 16,5		38	39
mean age 18,5		50	30
III (Adamson, 1999 b)	132	65	67

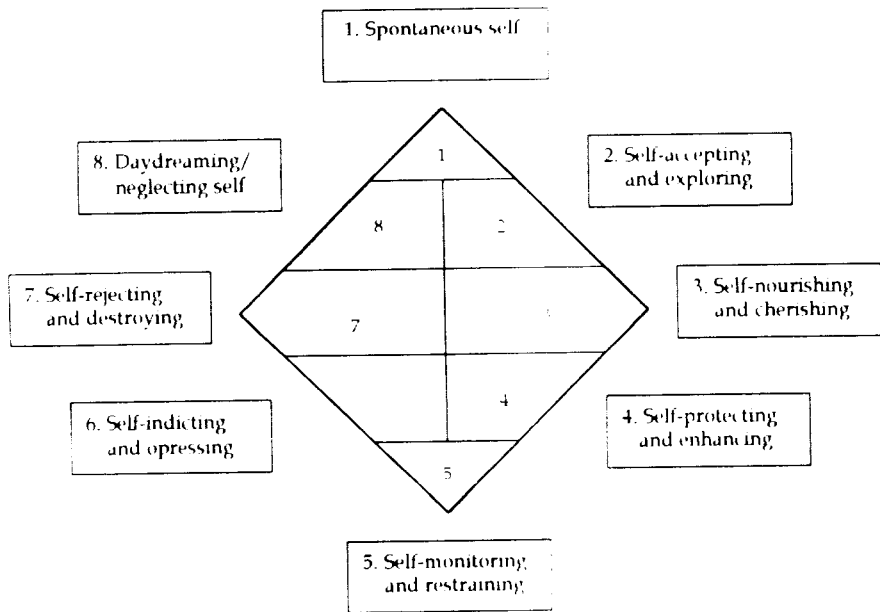


Figure 1
The cluster version of the SASB model.

Note. From Adamson and Lyxell (1996).

with the logic of a circumplex model.

The ratings from the SASB-INTREX are scored by a computer program (Benjamin, 1983) that weights each rating in relation to its position on the basic circumplex dimensions of love and control. The result for each person is presented as eight cluster-values (ranging from 1-100, not discussed in the present article), and four coefficients (ranging from -1.00 - +1.00, for interpretations see Table 3).

These four coefficients provide different types of overall measures, where the *consistency coefficient* (focus in this presentation), is a measure of how consistent with the theoretical model the individual scores. High consistency is interpreted as "normal" personality development, and includes high ratings on the right side of the model and low ratings on the left side of the model. That is, a normal self is characterized by

self-love, combined with both self-control and a spontaneous self. There are two ways of deviating from this normal pattern. The individual may score systematically high on both sides of one dimension (e.g. affiliation/love: "I love myself at the same time as I hate myself"), which indicates a *conflicted* self-concept, or unsystematically across the whole model, which indicates a *diffuse* self-concept ("I really don't know who I am or what I am like"). In all three studies inconsistency has been defined as values lower than .50 (L. S. Benjamin, personal communication, April, 17, 1998), and conflict as values higher than plus-minus .60 (W. P. Henry, personal communication, April 6, 1998).

Test-retest reliability for the American version of SASB is .87 with adult samples (Benjamin, 1984). The internal consistency of SASB in a normal adult sample is typically very high, near or

Table 2
Sample of SASB-INTREX Introject Items by cluster

Cluster	Item
1	Without concern I just let myself be free to turn into whatever I will.
2	Knowing both my faults and strong points I comfortably let myself be "as is".
3	I like myself very much and feel very good when I have a chance to be with myself.
4	I practise and work on developing worthwhile skills, ways of being.
5	I have a habit of keeping very tight control of myself.
6	I accuse and blame myself until I feel guilty, bad and ashamed.
7	I harshly punish myself, take it out on myself.
8	Instead of getting around to doing what I really need to do for myself, I let myself go and just daydream.

above .90 (Benjamin, 1974, 1984). Regarding construct validity, factor analysis shows that 75% of the total variance in cluster ratings can be explained by three factors. This applies both to the American version and the Swedish translation (Armeliu & Öhman, 1990). These results also refer to adults.

For further information on the Swedish version of the SASB see Armeliu, Lindelöf and Mårtensson (1983), Armeliu and Öhman (1990), Armeliu and Stiwne (1986), and Öhman (1992).

Study IV: Single case interview study

The interview data presented in this article derives from a larger project where twelve

adolescents were recurrently interviewed on identity-related issues (first report in Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999). This project covers three different topics: the participants' self-concepts ("Please tell me who you are"), their questions of life ("What do you find important in your life right now, what do you often find yourself thinking about?"), and, finally, their contacts with adults ("Who are the adult persons in your life?" and "Do you think it is important to have adults in your life, and, if so, why?"). In addition to the interview questions, the respondents were also asked to fill out the SASB inventory. On the first occasion, two of the respondents were assessed as inconsistent. The young man (Hugo) discussed in the present

Table 3
Interpretations of the four SASB-coefficients with focus on the introject

Coefficient	Positive values	Negative values
Attack	self-hate	self-love
Control	self-control	spontaneity
Conflict	self-control/spontaneity	self-love/self-hate
Consistency	stable	ratings near zero or negative; introject is unintegrated/diffuse or ambivalent /conflicted

article was selected here due to his transition from an inconsistent to a consistent self-concept at the time of the second assessment. During a period of 18 months he moved from an inconsistent/conflicted (consistency coefficient: .04 and conflict coefficient: .74) to a consistent/non-conflicted (consistency coefficient: .64 and conflict coefficient: .42) picture of himself. The first meeting with Hugo was in 1996; he was 16 years old, doing his first year at upper secondary school. The second meeting took place in September 1998 at the same place with the same interviewer and on the same three topics as on the first occasion. The results from the interviews were subjected to independent ratings (for discussions on quality in qualitative studies, see Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999; Jensen, 1989; Kvale 1989; Larson, 1993; Salner, 1989).

Results and Discussion

This section is divided in two parts. First, quantitative results on age-related differences, distribution patterns, and some factors associated to (in)consistency, are presented. The second part consists of qualitative data and

addresses the issue of transitions from self-concept inconsistency to self-concept consistency.

Age related differences, distribution patterns and factors related to self-concept (in)consistency

Consistency: Comparisons between adolescents and adults. When comparing adolescents with a group of adults (Adamson, 1999a), Mann-Whitney U tests revealed that both 16- and 18-year-olds scored lower than adults on the SASB consistency coefficient (16-year-olds, z corrected for ties = -2.5 $p < .05$; and 18-year-olds, z corrected for ties = -2.5 $p < .05$). No difference was obtained between the two adolescent groups. In sum, adolescents showed lower internal consistency than the adult population.

Consistency vs. inconsistency: General distribution among adolescents. In Study I (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996), 23% of the respondents displayed an inconsistent self-concept vs. 77% who did not. In Study II the respective figures were 16% vs. 84%, and in Study III 15% vs. 85% (see Table 4). That is, consistency is more common than inconsistency, but approximately 20% of the

Table 4
Distribution of self-concept consistency vs. Inconsistency among adolescents, and self-concept inconsistency among adolescent girls and adolescent boys

Study	n	Consistent		Inconsistent		Inconsistent			
						Females		Males	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I	44	34	(77)	10	(23)	6	(60)	4	(40)
II	157	132	(84)	25	(16)	16	(64)	9	(36)
III	132	112	(85)	20	(15)	14	(70)	6	(30)
Total	333	278	(83)	55	(17)	36*	(65)	19	(35)

Note. * $p < .05$, females are significantly more inconsistent than males.

participants displayed an inconsistent self-concept. It is important to note here that consistency does not necessarily mean a positive self-concept; one may have a self-concept characterized by low self-love and still be consistent. Further, in terms of inconsistency and gender, there was a significant difference between females and males, with females being more often inconsistent than males ($z = 2.2, p < .05$).

Inconsistency: Conflict vs. diffusion. As mentioned in the Method section, an inconsistent self-concept can be of two kinds: inconsistent/conflicted vs. inconsistent/diffused. Study I showed that 7 of the 10 adolescents with an inconsistent self-concept were diffused, and 3 were conflicted. The respective figures in Study II and III were 19 vs. 6 and 16 vs. 4. In the total sample of inconsistent individuals ($N = 55$), those with an inconsistent/diffused self-concept were significantly more than those with an inconsistent/conflicted self-concept, $\chi^2(1, N = 55) = 7.6, p < 0.01$. In sum, the results suggest that it is more common to have an inconsistent/diffuse than an inconsistent/conflicted self-concept.

Factors related to self-concept (in)consistency. The joint results from studies I-III (Adamson, 1999a, 1999b; Adamson, & Lyxell, 1996) indicate the following empirical pattern. Individuals with an inconsistent self-concept believe less in adults' interest in issues of importance to young people, $F(1, 42) = 4.06, p < .05, M_{CON} = 3.06, M_{INCON} = 2.3$ (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996), than those with a consistent self-concept; they have lower confidence in their own ability to shape their lives, $F(1, 128) = 15.8, p = .001, M_{CON} = 4.5, M_{INCON} = 3.4$ (Adamson, 1999b); they are less satisfied with themselves, $F(1, 42) = 26.11, p < .001, M_{CON} = 4.12, M_{INCON} = 2.9$ (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996); $F(1, 128) = 7.3, p = .01, M_{CON} = 3.8, M_{INCON} = 3.3$ (Adamson, 1999b); and they stated that they had made active suicide attempts more often, $\chi^2(1, N = 44) = 10.94, p < .001$ (Adamson, & Lyxell, 1996). In

addition, chi-square revealed that when subdividing the inconsistent group into diffuse vs. conflicted, individuals with a conflicted self-concept scored significantly higher on suicide attempts than the ones with a diffuse self-concept, $\chi^2(1, N = 35) = 9.8, p < .05$ (Adamson, 1999a). Finally, an inconsistent self-concept was significantly related to having negative images of one's personal future: "I worry a lot about my personal future", $F(1, 128) = 3.8, p < .05, M_{CON} = 3.1, M_{INCON} = 3.9$; and "I feel lonely when it comes to things that concern my future", $F(1, 128) = 8.2, p < .01, M_{CON} = 2.3, M_{INCON} = 3.3$ (Adamson, 1999b).

In sum, having an inconsistent picture of oneself at this age is related to a number of factors of negative nature. The results also indicate a difference between an inconsistent/diffuse and an inconsistent/conflicted self-concept, in the sense that inconsistency/conflict may be a more problematic pattern than inconsistency/diffusion.

Transitions from an inconsistent to a consistent self-concept: Hugo, a case study

Interview I

Background. The first interview revealed a very troubled young man with a complicated life history. His biological parents left Hugo at a train station in Sri Lanka, when he was about three years old. He was placed in a home for abandoned children and later on he was adopted. The family included another adopted child, a girl of the same age as Hugo, and two younger brothers who were the biological children of the parents. Hugo's upbringing included physical abuse by his father on a regular basis, while, according to Hugo, his mother passively stood by. The family seemed altogether chaotic. Hugo told stories about his father running around naked with a shotgun, quarreling with his mother and shouting at anyone coming near. Hugo had also been

severely bullied most of his time at school, mainly because of his dark skin, he told. Also here he experienced that he had been surrounded by adults (i.e., teachers), who did nothing to help him. In terms of the three areas the interview covered, Hugo's responses were as follows:

Question 1 - Self-concept: "Please tell me who you are". Hugo found the task to describe himself difficult. He started by describing himself as a calm sort of person, a good listener and a person who others came to when they wanted someone to talk to. However, he also reported outbreaks of anger and feelings of "tremendous despair". At first, he denied that he let out his rage on others but soon after said that he often hit people in anger. In sum, Hugo described himself in a contradictory manner, a calm person with frequent outbreaks of anger, a description fully in line with his very inconsistent SASB results. In addition, these contradictions referred to issues of control rather than issues of self-love/self-hatred, which further confirm the SASB picture where Hugo was conflicted on the control dimension and not the dimension of love.

Question 2 - Questions of life. In relation to this part of the interview the results of the total study showed that questions of life in general concerned questions of one's personal future. That is, issues related to the past were rare, issues related with the present more common, whereas issues to do with the future were represented by all respondents but one (Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999). However, this was not the case with Hugo, who was constantly referring to his unhappy past and not even when probed about his future commented very much on this topic. This is a quotation that illustrates his sadness about his childhood:

... so, every summer I saw all the others, my sister and my brothers, go off to pick up strawberries, and I wasn't allowed to go along, and that is *still* my dream, to go and pick strawberries ... in a strawberry field ...

Hugo's dream was in fact to re-live his childhood:

Well, it's silly really, but I dream about having another family, where I would be given the opportunity to grow up like children should; with love and respect.

Questions 3 & 4 - Adult contacts. This part of the interview contained two questions; "Please tell me about who the adults in your life are" and, "Do you need adults in your life and, in that case, why?". In response to the first question, Hugo listed his parents and the members of his football team. At the second question he answered that parents are very important to have, and he pointed out again that they should love and respect you and also "tell you what is right and wrong", issues he came back to throughout the interview.

In sum, Hugo had difficulties in describing himself, he hardly ever thought about his future but was instead very preoccupied with his unhappy past. He expressed a lot of grief, anger and even hatred towards his parents. This was coupled with a strong wish for a new family, which would have treated him with love and respect, and helped him understand the difference between right and wrong. This was the essence of the first interview with Hugo.

Interview II

Hugo looked very different at this second meeting; he smiled and looked happy. This is what he said had happened since last time we met. Hugo left home just after the first interview, he made a decision to attend a school of his own choice rather than the school that his parents had chosen for him. He also decided that he did not want to have anything more to do with his parents, especially his father. What caused these decisions he did not reveal. His parents were getting a divorce at the time, maybe this enabled Hugo to also break up. So, he left school, he left home and he even left town, to start in a new school, aiming towards becoming a chef. However, things did not go well. He was using drugs, getting into fights and creating a picture of

himself as a "heavy guy, not to be messed with, or one would end up in trouble". Looking back at Hugo's descriptions of his father in the first interview this is a very accurate picture also of him: a man who ruled his environment by means of physical violence, totally lacking in sensitivity to other people's needs. To summarize, geographical separation did not help Hugo to separate psychologically from earlier identifications. However, at one point something happened, he made up his mind to get a hold of his life:

Hugo: "I said to myself, I have to get out of this, I have to sort myself out, so I decided to definitely split that scene."

Interviewer: "How did you do that?"

Hugo: "I realized how things went at school, the teachers were telling me off, they were disappointed, they said that I was doing really well in the beginning, but then I sort of lost it ... then I didn't receive my student allowance any more ... no money ... I thought this is no good ... had nowhere to live, I had to stay one night here one night there ... and then I just thought things had gone too far ..."

He then told of a young man who attended the same class. This classmate had spoken to his parents who, in turn, contacted Hugo and offered him to move into their home. This was the situation since about ten months back at the time of the second interview.

Analyses of Hugo's self-concept transition.

In 18 months Hugo moved from an inconsistent/conflicted self-concept to a consistent self-concept. The question is, what happened between the first and the second interview and how can this transition be understood? The theory behind the SASB system (Benjamin, 1974) postulates (a) that the picture we carry of ourselves, indeed the way we *treat* ourselves, is mirroring the treatment received by early significant others, and (b) that early experience is critical in this process, *but*, the formation and content of the self-concept is also assumed to be subjected to development and change across life

span (Henry, Schacht, & Strupp, 1990). So, can Hugo's self-concept transition be understood by combining his story with these theoretical assumptions?

Beginning by looking at the significant others in Hugo's life, we find that it is possible to divide his story in three periods: first, living with his parents, second, living on his own and, third, his current situation, living with his new family. The significant others of the *first* period were his parents. People living in a chaotic state, including verbal and physical violence, large amounts of alcohol, and, as Hugo pointed out a number of times, no sense of "what was right and wrong". This is how he looked upon adults at the time:

... I thought adults were nothing, *they* should listen to *me* ... when I left home I didn't have any respect for people older than myself ... when they just think of you as a problem ... I thought if they don't listen to me, I won't listen to them ...

During the *second* period, when Hugo lived on his own, he did not mention any specific person as being close or important to him. The impression he gave was that he just moved around in different constellations of people of the same age as himself. The significant others of his *current* situation was his friend's parents. This is how he described them:

they listen to me and say that they like me ... and when I do something good they tell me that, and when I do something bad they tell me that too ... it feels as if they care.

This is a radically different picture from his previous descriptions of his parents. The quotation also gives insight to a process where Hugo receives new, and evidently more balanced, pictures of himself by others, which, in turn, can help explain his self-concept transition. Kroger (1993, p. 218) suggests that in order to move from one *identity status* (Marcia, 1966) to another, "the individual needs to become aware of a conflict or discrepancy, between perceived role expectation and a personal desire for change". This process is facilitated by "a significant other that bridges both

sides of this internal conflict, but ultimately supports the needs of the newly emerging self". Although Hugo's friend, apart from his parents, may have been important for Hugo's changing picture of himself, his most important role may have been to "bridge both sides of an internal conflict". Thus, representing the world that Hugo was already living in, and at the same time, offering him an opportunity to move into a new world. The question is whether Hugo would have been able to take up the offer unless this "bridging significant other" (Kroger, 1993) had existed.

In sum, during the time span between Interview I and II in which Hugo's transition from an inconsistent to a consistent self-concept took place, his interpersonal relationships had changed radically in terms of quality. We suggest that this change of interpersonal relationships also influenced the change in Hugo's way of perceiving and describing himself. Subsequently, these results would also indicate the impact that other people may have on adolescents and their self-concept development. Interestingly, when Hugo is left to describe this change in his own words, he tangents the issue of consistency and non-contradiction himself. This is what he said when confronted with the answers of a sentence completion task ("When I think about myself, I think"...) he had been asked to fill in prior to the first interview:

I think I have changed a bit ... I look ahead a lot more nowadays, I used not to think that the future mattered ... and if I want to do something now I do it, and if I want to say something I say it ... it never used to be so easy to do that ... *things are ... more straightforward now* ... and I am not scared on the inside as I used to be.

Finally, and now more congruent with the overall empirical pattern of Study IV, Hugo's time perspective had also changed from a pre-occupation with the past to focusing more on the future [see also Adamson (1999c) and Nurmi (1991) for a further discussion on adolescent identity and future orientation].

Conclusions

Group data indicate that adolescents are less consistent in their self-assessments of themselves than adults. Further, self-concept inconsistency during late adolescence is related to several factors of negative nature and therefore should be viewed with caution. Finally, data from a case study present evidence that it is possible to move from an inconsistent to a consistent self-concept, and these data also strongly suggest that the change of quality in interpersonal relationships may be one important factor in this transition.

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