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### Experiencing Self-Definition Problems over the Life Span

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#### ABSTRACT

Throughout the lifespan, defining a clear self-view plays a key role in both self-concept and identity development. Yet, people may encounter problems of self-definition when constructing an image of themselves as result of contrasts or ambiguities in their ideas about themselves. In this study, differences in the occurrence and types of self-definition problems were investigated in a sample of 733 Dutch participants, divided into four groups aged 17, 40, 55, and 70 years respectively. To measure self-definition problems, we developed a self-report instrument that investigated a range of problems drawn from two distinct research traditions: self-concept development and identity formation. The results revealed that participants experienced only a modest number of the presented problems. They showed, nevertheless, a clear age pattern: the adolescents distinguished themselves from the adult age groups by their concern with the problem of multiplicity, whereas during adulthood the problem of personal authenticity gave way to that of existential vacuum in old age. This pattern corresponds well with the temporal profile in the dynamics of lifespan development and Erikson’s model of ego development.

Humans have distinctive self-reflexive skills (Sedikides et al., 2006). They are able to evaluate themselves and their current state of affairs and to picture themselves in imaginary situations. They can envision different answers to the question of who they are, can be, or can become. Self-reflection, therefore, can play an essential role in how individuals see and define themselves and what identity choices they make. When attempting to define a picture of themselves, individuals may encounter various cognitive problems, for instance, how to integrate contrasting ideas about themselves, how to combine different roles (career and fatherhood) or disparate perspectives (actual self-concept and ideal self-concept), or how to make authentic identity choices (Van der Werff, 1985, 1990). We will call these diverse problems “self-definition problems”.

The Dutch psychologist Jacobus Van der Werff (1985) was one of the first to observe the fact that self-definition problems are addressed in two distinct research traditions: self-concept research, mainly in social and personality psychology, and the study of identity formation from the Eriksonian perspective in developmental psychology. In the first tradition, several types of disparities or contrasts in the self-concept are studied. In the second tradition, achieving and maintaining an identity may raise difficulties. A lack of authentic identity choices or an inability to choose may lead to identity confusion. These two research traditions represent two different types of self-definition problems that, following Baumeister (1995), can be labeled as “identity conflict” problems and “identity deficit” problems.

For a long time, self-concept and identity research formed two separate, unrelated research domains (e.g., Vignoles et al., 2011). However, more recent theorizing and research has started to explore the conceptual and empirical overlap between these two constructs. Schwartz et al. (2011), for
instance, provided empirical evidence that personal identity certainty and the clarity of one’s self-concept are closely related to one another. They considered both to “represent part of the process of developing a sense of who one is” (p. 373). (See also Schwartz et al., 2012, 2017). Côté and Levine (2016) had a different suggestion. They see self-concept development in childhood and early adolescence as a precursor of identity development. In adolescence and young adulthood, the individual’s diverse self-images and identifications have to be transformed into a clear and internally consistent set that gives the individual a sense of unity and continuity, in short, a personal identity. According to Sneed and Whitbourne (2003), the relation between self-consistency and maintaining a sense of identity remains an integral part of identity development over the life course, because age-related physical, psychological, and social changes in adulthood may challenge a previously established self-definition.

In our study on self-definition problems, we combined theory and research of both research traditions in the fields of self-concept and identity. Self-definition problems are inherent to both self-concept and identity processes. They can be seen as the cognitive, conscious manifestation of both processes in the way that people try to understand themselves. A first question that arose was to what extent individuals experience self-definition problems over the lifespan. A second question concerned differences in the types of self-definition problems being experienced over the lifespan. To investigate this, a questionnaire was constructed covering a broad range of possible self-definition problems described in the literature of both traditions.

**Self-definition problems in the literature**

Following Baumeister (1995), we started by conceptually distinguishing two types of self-definition problems, an identity-conflict and an identity-deficit type. Representatives of the identity-conflict type, such as contradictions and ambiguities in the process of self-definition, can be found in various approaches in developmental, social, and personality psychology, which attests to the multifaceted nature of self-concept and identity. However, this literature is scattered and the approaches are limited to specific, often unrelated theoretical frameworks, each with its own empirical definitions and measures. We will briefly discuss four main lines of research, each exemplifying sources of disparities in the process of self-definition.

A first source lies in the social awareness of the individual. People generally take part in different social contexts requiring different social roles, each role implying a different definition of themselves (e.g., as a mother, as a wife, in pursuit of a career). Usually, individuals combine and integrate social roles, but some of these may well prove to be incompatible. This may force individuals to choose between identifying with their roles, or rejecting these as being invalid to their personal identity, thus losing a sense of unity (Kaplan & Garner, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2003).

A second source focuses on the ability to take a social perspective, perceiving oneself through the imaginary eyes of the other. This makes people aware of their public appearance, which can lead to strategic forms of impression management and self-presentation (Oyserman, 2004). An increased social awareness may also induce people to make a distinction between publicly observable aspects of themselves and the more private, hidden aspects (Schlenker, 2003).

A third source of disparate self-deﬁnitions refers to the perceived distance between one’s aspirations and reality. This was already mentioned by James (1890/1950). He stated that the degree to which one is able to realize one’s personal goals in life is an important predictor of subjective well-being. Rogers (Rogers & Dymond, 1954) used the discrepancy of the “ideal self” and “actual self” as an index for psychotherapeutic success. In the self-discrepancy theory, Higgins (1987) added with the “ought self” a second personal standard to the “ideal self”, emphasizing a sense of obligation toward one’s personal and social standards.

Finally, self-definition problems can also stem from discrepancies between the individual’s self-perceptions in the past, in the present or in the future. Future self-perspectives have a motivational character which is clearly expressed in the concepts of “possible selves” (Frazier & Hooker, 2006;
H. Markus & Nurius, 1986) and “possible identities” (Oyserman & James, 2011). Hoped-for possible selves are more likely to drive people forward, and feared possible selves to hold them back (Cross & Markus, 1991). These four sources – unity versus disparity, public versus private, aspired versus real, and past or future versus present – can be conceived as a breeding ground for all kinds of disparities in the attempt to come to a more synthesized, unitary self-definition (cf. Vignoles et al., 2011).

The identity-deficit type of self-definition problems is most explicitly expressed in Erikson’s notion of a sense of identity confusion in adolescence, as opposed to a sense of identity achievement (Erikson, 1959/1980, 1968). Adolescents in identity confusion are unable to find personally meaningful elements for their self-definition, resulting in a feeling of self-alienation. Baumeister et al. (1985) describe this problem as a form of emotional and epistemic detachment (see also Van der Werff, 1990). Detailed empirical evidence for identity problems, stress, and uncertainty in adolescence is provided by empirical studies on Marcia’s identity status model (Marcia, 2014; Marcia et al., 1993), identity confusion (e.g., Gandhi et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2009), ruminative exploration (Luyckx et al., 2008), identity distress (e.g., Berman & Montgomery, 2014) and identity issues (Roberts & Côté, 2014).

Self-concept and identity problems are found to be associated with a lack of well-being, low self-esteem, and internalizing problems (see Schwartz et al., 2012, for a concise overview). However, this association does not apply to everyone experiencing problems in self-concept and identity development. Many intervening variables may play a role. Schwartz et al. (2017), for instance, described that individuals who are actively reconsidering their commitments usually come to new commitments, whereas ruminating individuals may become anxious and depressed. Some individuals may derive hope from the discrepancy between their actual and ideal self-concept, while others seek counseling (cf. Rogers & Dymond, 1954). The study of self-definition problems is of interest, because defining or reconsidering one’s self-concept or identity is not always a carefree and self-evident process. This process may raise cognitive difficulties for the individual. A process which is analogous to the findings described here might also be associated with mental health problems.

**Self-definition problems over the lifespan**

Self-definition is an issue when a person’s self-concept or identity needs to be reconsidered. This can happen on different time scales (Lichtwark-Aschoff et al., 2008). The focus in our study is on relatively long-term changes over the lifespan.

In the literature on identity development, self-definition is most often related to the identity crisis in adolescence. According to Erikson (1959/1980, 1968), this crisis is instigated by an accumulation of physiological, psychological, and social changes. Adolescents are expected to become full-fledged members of the community, that is, to acquire a “defined self within social reality” (Erikson, 1950/1963, p. 235). They have to achieve an identity by making choices in defining themselves and their place in society. In modern societies, there are many possible identities to choose from (cf. Brandstätter, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2005). Given the pressure on the individual’s self-defining skills, it is only logical that this transitional phase is characterized by feelings of confusion and uncertainty.

Once and if an identity has been achieved in adolescence, it needs revision from time to time in response to further changes in the individual’s personality and life circumstances (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). During the life course, individuals are constantly subjected to developmental changes in their mental and motivational resources, as well as in contextual opportunities and constraints (e.g., Baltes et al., 2006; Hutteman et al., 2014). These changes may bring about a new outlook, not just on these people’s lives, but also on themselves, requiring adjustment of their self-definition (Brandstätter, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2017; Whitbourne & Sneed, 2009). Marcia (2002) suggested recurring cycles of identity questioning and confusion and identity achievement in adulthood. In each of the adult developmental stages that Erikson distinguished, Marcia and colleagues (Marcia, 2014) found evidence for identity questioning and confusion. Similar findings come from authors within the narrative tradition (see Kroger, 2015, for an overview). The literature on identity
confusion and the narrative tradition thus indicates that self-definition problems continue to manifest themselves throughout adulthood.

The empirical literature on developmental changes over the lifespan shows a fairly consistent pattern which may have possible consequences for the self-definition processes during the course of life. The focus in young adulthood lies on future growth, in middle adulthood on personality maturation, and in later adulthood on maintenance of the status quo and regulation of loss (cf. Baltes et al., 1999). This age pattern is also reflected in the content of the possible selves and self-definations that people create in order to guide their further development. The possible selves of young adults are directed to future personal growth (Cross & Markus, 1991; Ryff, 1991). In middle adulthood, they tend to become more realistic and oriented toward autonomy (Ryff, 1991), and toward the continuation of gains and maintenance of the status quo (Timmer et al., 2003). In later adulthood and old age, most possible selves are related to maintenance of environmental mastery and good health (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2011; Ryff, 1991; Timmer et al., 2003).

In conclusion, there is circumstantial evidence that uncertainty and identity questioning are not restricted to adolescence, but also occur in adulthood and old age. Such evidence is more conclusive for findings on identity confusion and in the narrative tradition that can be placed within the identity-deficit type of self-definition problems. The evidence from studies on developmental changes in self-concept is less direct, but nevertheless, they make it very plausible that identity-conflict problems can occur throughout the lifespan.

Aim of the study

The aim of this explorative study was to investigate self-definition problems over the lifespan, combining the theoretical and research traditions on self-concept and identity development. For this purpose, a questionnaire (Questionnaire of Self-Definition Problems, QSDP) was constructed that included the two conceptually distinct types of possible self-definition problems in these traditions: the conflict type and the deficit type. Existing measures, for example, the self-discrepancy measure of Hardin and Lakin (2009) and the identity diffusion measure of Schwartz et al. (2009), were not suitable for this purpose. They only cover specific aspects of the range of possible self-definition problems.

The questions studied were, first, to what extent do individuals experience self-definition problems? Second, do the types of self-definition problems being experienced alter over the lifespan?

The general expectation was that self-definition problems are not confined to adolescence, but persist in later age periods, although the type of self-definition problems might reflect the individuals’ stage of life. Because of the diversity in theories and the exploratory nature of the study, no further expectations were formulated.

Method

Participants and procedure

To investigate self-definition problems over the lifespan, we selected four groups of individuals aged 17, 40, 55, and 70 years respectively. The age of 17 was chosen because this age is considered to be the lower limit at which people are cognitively able to reflect on personal inconsistencies (Harter & Monsour, 1992). The other ages represent crucial stages in the adult life course, respectively early middle adulthood, later middle adulthood, and late adulthood. In present-day western societies, these stages are the prototypical turning points in the process of personal self-definition. The adolescent and young adult years are generally considered to be formative of a personal identity and of establishing an adult position in society. Early middle adulthood is viewed as a time of reevaluating the direction one’s life has taken, later middle adulthood as the consolidation and completion of one’s vocational and
family responsibilities, and late adulthood as the post-retirement phase and the gradual decline of physical and social possibilities (cf. Kroger, 2000; Marcia, 2002).

The aim was to study the occurrence of self-definition problems in the general population. Therefore, a random sampling procedure, stratified by age and gender, was used to choose participants of the specified ages at the time of recruitment from the municipal population register of Groningen, a Dutch city of circa 200,000 inhabitants. Nearly 4,500 persons were contacted by mail, of whom 1,150 agreed to take part and 733 ultimately participated in the study (an overall response rate of 16.5%; 18.2% for the group aged 17, 20.5% for the group aged 40, 16.3% for the group aged 55, and 11.5% for the group aged 70). The final sample consisted of 188 participants aged 17 (47% male), 219 aged 40 (46% male), 192 aged 55 (45% male), and 134 aged 70 (49% male). The vast majority of the participants were of white Dutch ethnicity and the two youngest age groups had comparatively higher educational levels.

Addressees who agreed to participate received a questionnaire by mail that could be filled in at home and returned in an enclosed envelope. Participants received no compensation for their participation. The absence of monetary incentives, in combination with a topic that might not be of special relevance to addressees, might explain the relatively low response rate. According to Edwards et al. (2002), these factors tend to reduce the potential response rate by half.

Measures

The questionnaire of self-definition problems

As discussed under “aim of the study”, it was necessary to construct a new instrument to measure self-definition problems, the Questionnaire of Self-Definition Problems (QSDP).

Item construction. An initial pool of about 200 items was generated, based on the conceptual distinction between identity-conflict (experiencing contrasting self-definitions from different sources: diverging social roles; private versus public self-awareness; ideal/ought versus real self; discontinuities between past, present, and future) and identity-deficit (experiencing a lack of meaningful self-definitions). Two considerations were crucial in the formulation of the items. First, the items should refer to the respondents’ personal experience; second, the items should in principle be relevant to each of the four age groups. Furthermore, a distinction was made in three different modalities in which self-definition problems could be experienced: the cognitive aspect of self-knowledge (“knowing oneself”), the ontological aspect of self-identification (“being oneself”), and the social aspect of self-expression (“describing oneself”) (cf. Baumeister, 1998; Harré, 1998). The items thus generated all share the same basic syntax of a stem x specification. The specification refers to one of the conceptually distinct types of self-definition problems, whereas the stem refers to one of the modalities in which that specific problem makes itself felt. Some examples of the items are: “I find it difficult to know myself, because there regularly turns out to be something that doesn’t fit the image I have of myself” (verbalizing a contrast between changeability and stability); “I sometimes find it difficult to be myself, because I have to conform too much to the people around me” (verbalizing a contrast between the person one thinks one is and the person others impose one to be); and “I find it difficult to describe myself, because I don’t really have anything to say about myself” (verbalizing the existential vacuum, that is, lack of personal meaning).

Questionnaire construction. To obtain a manageable set of items, a jury of five experts in the field of self-concept and identity research selected 48 items that best represented the variety of self-definition problems in the literature. The items were to be equally divided over the previously established types of self-definition problems and the three modalities. As not all possible combinations proved to be intelligible on a more semantic level, some combinations had to be discarded. The QSDP eventually consisted of three separate parts, relating to the difficulty of knowing oneself (16 items), of being
oneself (18 items), and of describing oneself (14 items). Each set of items was preceded by a separate introduction, to help respondents focus on the modality involved.\(^1\)

The response format in the QSDP was twofold. Respondents first had to indicate whether they recognized the problem as applying to themselves. If so, they subsequently had to indicate to what extent it occupied their mind (hardly, sometimes, or often). We opted for this response format of a conditional, elementary Likert scale to avoid the risk of overtaxing the respondents’ judgmental capacity. In the multivariate analyses, both responses were integrated into a one-dimensional scale with the positions 0 (not recognized), 1 (recognized, but hardly preoccupies them), 2 (recognized, and sometimes preoccupies them), and 3 (recognized, and often preoccupies them). The rationale behind this rescaling was that when respondents do not recognize a problem, this implies that it does not occupy their mind.

**Scale construction.** The intercorrelations between the QSDP scores on item level allowed for a further clustering of the items into separate components (KMO = .97). To investigate whether the 48 items could be divided into several scales reflecting different types of self-definition problems, we performed a simultaneous component analysis (SCA) (Kiers & Ten Berge, 1989). Because the QSDP was to be used for a comparison between the four age groups, the scales had to be equally valid for each age group. The SCA algorithm produces components that all groups have in common, and, given this restriction, maximally account for the variance. These simultaneous components were defined by one and the same weight matrix for each group. Consequently, the composition of the components in terms of the weighted sum of the item scores was exactly the same for every age group (Ten Berge, 1986).

The weight matrix resulting from the SCA of the QSDP data was post-processed with varimax rotation of the weights, followed by a further rotation to oblique simple structure to enhance the interpretability (see Kiers, 1990). We opted for an oblique rotation, because it leaves intact the possible intercorrelations between the original components. This provided additional information about the extent to which the different types of self-definition problems were akin to each other in the four age groups. After post-processing different solutions with varimax and oblique rotation, a model with six simultaneous components proved to be the best option, accounting for 44.08% of the variance in the 17-year-olds to 54.55% in the 70-year-olds. All 48 items of the QSDP could be included in the final SCA solution. To safeguard the robustness of the scales, a simple weights procedure was used to further transform the SCA solution into unweighted Likert-type scales (Ten Berge et al., 1992).

The **appendix** presents an overview of the items, the distribution of the item weights, the explained variance, and Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) coefficients for the six scales. It is important to note that the labeling of the scales is based on the item weights, since in an SCA it is the commonality in weights that defines the components. The first scale represents the direct expression of the modality of problematic Self-knowledge, although the stems of the items differ. The items in the second scale are exclusively directed to the modality of Self-description, both in their stems and in their specifications. The third scale contains items that indicate a lack of sufficient leads for a meaningful self-definition and can be labeled as Existential Vacuum. The fourth scale consisted of items of a mixed nature, representing different modalities and disparities, yet all revolving around the issue of Personal Authenticity. A central qualification of the fifth scale is the Multiplicity of one’s self-definition. Finally, the sixth scale is characterized by self-definition problems as a consequence of personal changes and changeability and can be labeled as Personal Continuity. The Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) coefficients in the **appendix** show reliable scales for all four age groups (\(\alpha\’s\) ranging from .73 to .88), with the exception of the scale Existential Vacuum which shows moderate reliability for the adolescent age group (\(\alpha = .65\)). As a consequence of the combination of an SCA and oblique rotation of the components, the scales were noticeably interrelated, with correlations ranging from \(r = .32\) between Existential Vacuum and problematic Self-description in the 17-year-olds to \(r = .74\) between Existential Vacuum and Personal Authenticity in 70-year-olds.
**Statistical analyses**

The scores on the six scales of the QSDP were used to investigate age differences in the types of self-definition problems. First, a between-subjects MANOVA (age groups x types of self-definition problems) was carried out to test for the multivariate age effect. Because the scales are based on non-orthogonal components, subsequent ANCOVAs controlling for the intercorrelations between types of self-definition problems were used to test for the univariate age effects in the separate types of self-definition problems, with the other types as covariates. As a last step, an additional discriminant analysis was used to provide a more comprehensive insight into the underlying tendencies that differentiate the four age groups in terms of self-definition problems.

**Results**

**The general occurrence of self-definition problems at four different ages**

A general index of the extent to which the participants of different ages experienced self-definition problems was created by averaging the number of items that the participants recognized as applying to themselves. Across the sample, participants recognized on average 13.9 of a total of 48 items (SD = 10.3). Adolescents recognized more problems as applying to themselves than the adults did (M_{17} = 16.6, M_{40} = 12.8, M_{55} = 13.3, M_{70} = 12.9; SDs = 9.6, 9.7, 10.5, and 11.2). This age effect was highly significant: F(3, 729) = 5.78, p = .0007, HSD at p = .01: 17 > (40 = 55 = 70). Yet, the means in the adult groups indicated that experiencing problems with one’s personal self-definition did not abate with increasing age.

However, recognizing a problem does not mean in all cases that the problem is regarded as a concern. Only when participants recognized a problem and also indicated that this occupied their mind sometimes or often was a problem regarded as such. The age effect in the average number of problems experienced as preoccupying (scores 2 and 3) roughly resembled that of the overall number of recognized problems, only to a less pronounced degree: F(3, 729) = 3.91, p = .0087, HSD at p = .01: 17 > 70, and with lower means (M_{17} = 11.1, M_{40} = 8.9, M_{55} = 9.3, and M_{70} = 7.9; SDs = 8.5, 8.7, 9.2, and 8.8).

No gender differences were found, either as a main effect in the number of problems recognized overall or considered preoccupying, or in interaction with age.

**Age-related changes in the types of self-definition problems**

**Testing the age effects**

The average scale scores reflect the extent to which the four age groups experienced different types of self-definition problems. Overall, the MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate age effect (Rao’s F (18, 2048) = 7.23; p < .001). Still, two remarks have to be made. First, the multivariate age effect, though strongly significant, was rather modest in relation to the total variance, as indicated by the value of .84 for Wilks’ Λ (Wilks’ Λ ranges from 0 to 1, and a value of 1 indicates total absence of a between-groups effect). Second, the assumption that the data should be normally distributed, univariately as well as multivariately, was violated. Analysis of the data distributions within each age group showed that the violation was due to the strong negative skewness of the scale scores. This skewness could not be eliminated by a logarithmic or square root transformation. However, the skewness was rather uniform throughout the scales and age groups. The variance-covariance matrices were also homogeneous over the age groups. Moreover, according to Stevens (1996), negative skewness will only have a small effect on the levels of significance and power of the F statistics.

A series of ANCOVAs was subsequently performed on each scale, treating the remaining scales as covariates. The resulting adjusted means and F statistics represent the unique effect per scale after the covariance of the other scales was partialed out (see Table 1). The skewness in the scale scores did not appear to violate the ANCOVA assumption of homogeneity of regression (Hays, 1994): The covariates
were all more or less linearly related to the dependent variable of age; there were no substantial interaction effects between the covariates and age, and the residual variances were constant over the age groups.

After the covariation between the scales had been partialed out, three scales showed a significant age effect: Existential Vacuum, Personal Authenticity, and Multiplicity. The age effect in Existential Vacuum indicated an increase over age, although the adjusted means were relatively low for all four age groups. Of all six scales, Personal Authenticity had the highest mean scores for all four groups. The age differences in problems with Personal Authenticity reflected an inverted U-shape with the highest adjusted means for the middle two age groups. The age effect in the Multiplicity scale showed that adolescents had the highest adjusted mean scores.

**Discriminating the four age groups**

The ANCOVA results represented the age differences for each of the six scales separately. To obtain a more integrated picture of the age differences in self-description problems, a discriminant analysis was used. In this analysis the six scales, representing the different types of self-definition problems, were treated as predictors of the differences between the age groups. The procedure aimed to establish discriminant functions, that is, linear combinations of predictors that maximally account for the group differences.

A breakdown of the canonical between-groups variance started with an initial level of association of Λ = .84, χ²(18) = 126.73, p = .000. After removal of the variance accounted for by a first discriminant function, the remaining level of association was Λ = .97, χ²(10) = 20.56, p = .024, and after removal by a second function, Λ = 1.00, χ²(4) = 2.28, p = .68. This indicated that there were two discriminant functions significantly related to the between-group differences at α < .05. The first function accounted for 84.61% of the between-groups variability, with χ²(8) = 106.17, p < .001, and the second function accounted for 13.70%, with χ²(6) = 18.28, p < .01. To enhance the interpretability, the two discriminant functions were rotated. After rotation, the first function accounted for 62.90%, and the second function for 37.10%. Again, one has to bear in mind that the high Λ-values suggest that the age differences are relatively small in comparison to the within-group variance. The interpretation of the two rotated discriminant functions was based on the correlations of the six QSDP scales with these functions and on the standardized function weights of the scales (see Table 2).

The first function was characterized by its high positive correlation with Multiplicity (r = .73), accompanied by problematic Self-description (r = .46) and Self-knowledge (r = .31). Essentially, the central characteristic of this first age discriminant is having difficulty with the construction of a coherent self-view, given the lack of correspondence between diverging self-definitions (Multiplicity). However, this interpretation requires a further explanation. As can be seen from the standardized weights in Table 2, Multiplicity and Personal Authenticity are the main predictors in this first function (respectively β = 1.15 for Multiplicity and β = −.83 for Personal Authenticity), whereas the problems of Self-knowledge and Self-description have no special predictive value. As the ANCOVA results showed, the age effects in the problems of Self-knowledge and Self-description appeared to originate from their relation with the other types of problems. Personal Authenticity plays

| Table 1. Age effects in types of self-definition problems: adjusted means, F- and p-values. |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------|--------|
|                                | M_adj.       |              |              |              | ANCOVA       |        |
|                                | 17 yrs.      | 40 yrs.      | 55 yrs.      | 70 yrs.      | F(3, 729)    | p      |
| Self-knowledge                 | 0.42         | 0.43         | 0.39         | 0.43         | 0.41         | .746   |
| Self-description               | 0.67         | 0.57         | 0.58         | 0.60         | 1.79         | .147   |
| Existential Vacuum             | 0.14         | 0.23         | 0.31         | 0.41         | 17.02        | <.001  |
| Personal Authenticity          | 0.72         | 0.82         | 0.80         | 0.70         | 4.33         | .005   |
| Multiplicity                   | 0.67         | 0.42         | 0.41         | 0.36         | 20.83        | <.001  |
| Personal Continuity            | 0.53         | 0.54         | 0.55         | 0.53         | 0.06         | .981   |

In the ANCOVA, we corrected for inter-scale correlations by treating the other scale scores as covariates. The resulting F-values refer to the unique effects per scale. The adjusted means refer to the predicted means per age after adjusting for covariates.
a more enigmatic role. While it is not correlated to the discriminant function, it does have a strong, but negative weight in the function. This indicates that the problem of Personal Authenticity may act as a suppressor. The rather high correlations between Personal Authenticity and the other predictors (ranging between $r = .49$ to $r = .74$) could well have masked the age differences present in the variances of Multiplicity, Self-description, and Self-knowledge that are unrelated to Personal Authenticity. In that case, the negative weight of Personal Authenticity could be interpreted as a correction for this masking effect. Consequently, the first function can be characterized as the feeling of fragmentation, which is multiplicity.

The second function was substantially correlated with Existential Vacuum ($r = .54$), and negatively correlated with problematic Personal Authenticity ($r = -.32$). The importance of these two contrasting scales in the second function is corroborated by their weights ($\beta = 1.17$ and $\beta = -.98$, respectively). Therefore, the second function rather unequivocally represents a polarity between Existential Vacuum and problematic Personal Authenticity. It represents an intrinsic contrast between a lack of meaningful anchorage and a feeling of being ruled by circumstances.

In short, the three scales with a unique univariate age effect, namely Multiplicity, Existential Vacuum, and Personal Authenticity, were also the main predictors that in combination discriminate between the four age groups. Multiplicity characterized the first function, and Existential Vacuum the second function. Personal Authenticity, which was the most commonly experienced type of self-definition problem in every age group, seems to act as a suppressor in the first function and as the opposite of Existential Vacuum in the second function. Judged by its discriminant weights and correlations, Personal Continuity was the only scale that did not contribute to the distinction between the age groups, either in the first discriminant function, or in the second. Problems with Self-knowledge and Self-description appeared related with age, but mainly as a derivative of Multiplicity and Personal Authenticity.

Figure 1 represents the plots of the age group means on both discriminant functions. These plots illustrate the basic shifts in the nature of the self-definition problems as the groups increase in age. The plots make clear that there are two opposite tendencies over the ages. Adolescents distinguished themselves from the adults by their high average discriminant score on the first function ($M_{17} = 0.57$) and their negative average discriminant score on the second function ($M_{17} = -0.29$). This means that the adolescent age group was characterized by the experience of fragmented self-conceptualizations (Multiplicity) and a relative absence of Existential Vacuum. In adulthood, the experience of fragmentation was not a discriminating factor at all. With the progression of age, Existential Vacuum became the distinctive feature, at the expense of problems with Personal Authenticity ($M_{40} = -0.12$, $M_{55} = 0.09$, and $M_{70} = 0.47$).

**Table 2. Two discriminant functions: correlations and standardized discriminant function weights.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correlations*</th>
<th></th>
<th>Standardized Weights*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Function 1</td>
<td>Function 2</td>
<td>Function 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential Vacuum</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Authenticity</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplicity</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Continuity</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pooled within-groups correlations between scales and discriminant functions

*Standardized discriminant function coefficients

**Discussion**

This study was based on the theoretical assumption that self-definition problems are a recurrent ingredient of self-concept development and identity formation across the lifespan (cf. Erikson, 1968; Greve et al., 2005; Schwartz, 2001; Van der Werff, 1990). To find empirical support for this
assumption, self-definition problems were investigated in four groups aged 17, 40, 55 and 70 years, respectively. An inventory was developed: the Questionnaire of Self-Definition Problems (QSDP), based on the two main theoretical approaches summarized in the introduction. Analyses led to six clearly distinguishable scales that could easily be labeled as Self-knowledge, Self-description, Existential Vacuum, Personal Authenticity, Multiplicity and Personal Continuity. With one exception, the internal consistencies of these six scales were acceptable for preliminary (alpha > .7) and basic research (alpha > .8) (Nunnally, 1978) in all four age groups. The usage of an SCA in combination with oblique rotation revealed relatively high intercorrelations between the scales. In studies on Higgins’ self-discrepancy theory, similarly high intercorrelations between the different types of self-discrepancies were found (e.g., Tangney et al., 1998). However, the intercorrelations were sufficiently low to justify a distinction between different types of problems.

The six scales reflected the two types of problems that were described, identity-conflict (Personal Authenticity, Multiplicity and Personal Continuity) and identity-deficit (Existential Vacuum), as well as two of the three modalities in which these problems might be experienced (Self-knowledge and Self-description). Items referring to the third modality, self-identification (“being oneself”), appeared to be dispersed over several scales, especially Existential Vacuum, Personal Authenticity, and Personal Continuity. It is noteworthy that the two research traditions behind the construction of the QSDP turned out to be represented in separate, but correlating scales. This contributes to the recent discussion about similarities and differences between the constructs self-concept and identity (Schwartz et al., 2011). It also supports our assumption that self-definition problems are processes that are relevant to both traditions.

**The occurrence of self-definition problems over the lifespan**

The total number of problems, summarized over the six scales, showed that the mean numbers of self-definition problems, both recognized (13.9 out of 48) and experienced as preoccupying (11.1 out of 48), were relatively low. These averages seem to suggest that self-definition problems are generally not a great

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**Figure 1.** Age-related shifts in self-definition problems over the life span on the basis of the average discriminant scores per age group on both discriminant functions.
concern to people. This does not rule out the possibility that for some, experiencing such problems may be merely a transient phenomenon when circumstances call for a personal redefinition, whereas for others it may be a more chronic ingredient of ruminative self-doubt (Schwartz et al., 2017). The low incidence could also be partly due to methodological issues, for instance, possible unfamiliarity with the phrasing and self-reflexive quality of the QSPD items. Nevertheless, significant differences between the four age groups were found that are in line with the literature on the subject, as we shall explain below. Still, further research is necessary before any firm conclusions can be drawn about the prevalence of self-definition problems and to what extent they are experienced as a personal concern.

Adolescents were the most susceptible to self-definition problems. Yet, we also found that experiencing self-definition problems stretches well into the later years of life. Our data, therefore, corroborate the life cycle notion of identity development (e.g., Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002; Côté & Levine, 1987; Kroger, 2015; Marcia, 2014; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003; Van der Werff, 1985, 1990). However, as our results indicated, the between-groups variance accounted for by age turned out to be rather modest compared to the within-groups variance. Hence, although a clear age effect could be observed, the kinds of self-definition problems that people experience are only in a limited sense constrained by age. This suggests the presence of other sources of variance, such as the more situational circumstances that the individual has to deal with and the personality-bound inclination toward reflexive self-definition (see Smith & Freund, 2002 for a comparable point).

The results of the ANCOVAs indicated that, after the covariation between the scales had been partialed out, three of the six scales showed a unique age effect at a strongly significant level: Existential Vacuum, Personal Authenticity, and Multiplicity. The types of problems in the remaining three scales, Self-knowledge, Self-description and Personal continuity, were equally prevalent at all four ages.

The discriminant analysis provided an integrated picture of the age effects. The changes in the nature of the self-definition problems can be summarized in two opposite tendencies.

The first discriminant function distinguished the adolescents quite radically from the adults. It was characterized by the problem of multiplicity, together with the difficulty of acquiring a clear self-view (i.e., problem of self-knowledge) and adequately articulating this view (i.e., problem of self-description). As such, it captures the adolescent identity crisis and its concomitant feelings of confusion and uncertainty (e.g., Berman & Montgomery, 2014).

The second discriminant function distinguished the adult age groups from each other. It showed that the problem of personal authenticity is at odds with the gradually increasing occurrence of existential vacuum problems with age. In persons experiencing problems with personal authenticity, the social world is considered to obstruct authenticity, whereas in the problem of existential vacuum it has become an insufficient source of identity. The disengagement from the roles, projects, and goals that one used to pursue (Brandstätter, 2009; Poulin et al., 2005) is the most likely explanation of the shift from problems with personal authenticity in early and middle adulthood to existential vacuum in late adulthood. Erikson characterized the identity dialectics in late adulthood as the integrity crisis, because the acceptance of loss could carry the danger of transmuting into a feeling of despair. The only remedy is to identify oneself with one’s past life as something that has been worth living (Erikson, 1968; Hearn et al., 2012). However, it must be noted that the shift from personal authenticity to existential vacuum problems is a relative one. Even for the 70-year-olds, authenticity was the most dominant problem. Apparently, older adults do not just resign themselves to passivity (see also Riediger & Freund, 2006; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). This is a sensible attitude in our society: our eldest participants were only 70 and as such belong to the relatively flourishing life phase of the so-called “young old”, or third age, whereas problems such as loss of identity and psychological autonomy are a more integral part of the “old old”, the fourth age (Baltes & Smith, 2003).

Taken together, self-definition problems of multiplicity, personal authenticity and existential vacuum show a gradual shift: from the feeling of confusion in adolescence, to the feeling of the middle-aged that one’s personal circumstances leave no room for a reorientation, to a loss of meaningful identifications in old age. This pattern corresponds remarkably well to the temporal profile of lifespan development, as proposed by Baltes and colleagues (e.g., Ebner et al., 2006). According to them, the
developmental resources in adolescence are directed toward growth, in adulthood toward maintenance and recovery of function, and in old age toward the regulation of loss. This shift in self-definition problems also neatly parallels Erikson’s model of ego development (Erikson, 1982; Marcia, 2014): problems of multiplicity in the adolescent identity crisis, of personal authenticity in the midlife generativity crisis, and of existential vacuum in the integrity crisis in old age.

**Limitations and future research**

The study has a number of limitations. First, participants appeared to recognize or experience only a modest number of the presented problems. The measurement of self-definition problems with the QSDP was based on an extensive literature review, but it may be that not all possible approaches were included. For instance, the newer models of identity are missing, which include the dynamics between identity certainty and uncertainty, comparable to Erikson’s identity coherence and confusion (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2012). In formulating vacuum-like items, references to the absence of worthwhile goals, for instance, the negative items of the framework scale in Battista and Almond’s Life Regard Index (Battista & Almond, 1973), could have enhanced the content validity. Instead of a questionnaire, a more open method, such as the interview employed in the study of possible selves (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Frazier & Hooker, 2006), might also have yielded different problems, stemming more directly from people’s own experiences.

Second, the four age groups of 17-, 40-, 55- and 70-year-olds only partly covered the human lifespan. Including 30-year-olds would have been worthwhile, because of the intimacy-versus-isolation crisis characteristic of this age group (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2000), and also because in most postindustrial societies the transition to adulthood has extended well into the late twenties (Arnett, 2015; Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). Another interesting group would have been the over-eighties. The question is whether the age trend in self-definition problems, specifically, an increase of existential vacuum problems, continues in the “fourth age” as a result of accelerated physical and psychological dysfunction in the very old (Baltes & Smith, 2003). Moreover, the generalization of the present clustering of self-definition problems into the six scales is also limited, because the participants originated from a medium-large city in the Netherlands, the vast majority of whom were of white Dutch ethnicity, and had relatively higher educational levels. A more representative sample might lead to a different clustering of the problems.

Third, the cross-sectional design of the study confounds age- and cohort-related developmental changes (Baltes et al., 1988). The age groups that were compared also constitute different birth cohorts. Their formative years cover the societal shift in most Western countries from a more traditional communal life where stable social ties and roles defined one’s identity (i.e., conferred or ascribed identity) to the self-chosen identities that fit the more individualized relationships of our contemporary market economy (e.g., Arnett, 2015; Brandstädter, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2005). Consequently, the age differences in self-definition problems in this study can also be explained as a reaction to these changing sociocultural conditions. However, given the correspondence of our findings with Erikson’s 70-year-old theory (Erikson, 1950/1963), we are more inclined toward an individual development explanation.

Fourth, the types of self-definition problems studied typically represent a Western cultural view on people. The problems originate from a rather individualistic, independent nature of people’s perception of themselves, whereas members of collectivist cultures perceive themselves more as interdependent with others, in particular their family (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2011; H. R. Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Smith, 2011). The impact of such cultural differences on identity development is quickly gaining interest, especially with the growing influx of immigrants from more collectivist societies to the West. During this cultural transition, immigrants are confronted with acculturation demands that threaten the cohesion between the personal, social, and cultural aspects of their identity (Schwartz et al., 2006). Yet, it is still largely unknown whether and how such dynamics between personal, social, and cultural identity may pertain to self-definition problems over the lifespan within different cultures.
Finally, we did not investigate the relation between self-definition problems and mental health. Schwartz et al. (2012) gave an overview of studies finding an association between self-concept and identity problems and a lack of well-being, low self-esteem, and internalizing problems. In accordance with such findings, Wängqvist and Frisén (2011) showed that active identity exploration might be associated with psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety, but that this relation was mediated by identity distress. In our view, it is possible that self-definition problems could lead to ruminations and coincide with maladjustment and problematic well-being, but this need not be the case. Self-definition problems may be accepted by the self-reflexive individual as a fact of life (Van der Werff, 1985, 1990; for a similar point see Schwartz et al., 2017), but empirical support for this assumption is necessary. Our data underscore this assumption. They showed that not all recognized self-definition problems also appeared to be preoccupying.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations mentioned, the empirical investigation of self-definition problems over the lifespan in this study provides an interesting further contribution to the field of self-concept development and identity formation, in particular to theory and research on the similarities and differences between these two constructs. The variety of self-definition problems derived from theory and research in both traditions appeared to boil down to six interrelated, but clearly distinguishable sorts of problems: problems of self-knowledge, self-description, existential vacuum, personal authenticity, multiplicity, and personal continuity. Three of these problems showed a gradual shift over the four age groups studied, moving from problems of multiplicity in adolescence, to those of personal authenticity in adulthood, to existential vacuum problems in old age. A question for future research is whether self-definition problems should be considered a common and natural fact of life, or be viewed as problematic processes that give rise to ruminative exploration and could be accompanied by maladjustment and problematic well-being.

Note

1. The original Dutch questionnaire and the English translation can be obtained from the first author.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Henk Kiers and Tom Snijders of the University of Groningen and Herbert Hoijtink of the University of Utrecht for their valuable statistical advices. They are also greatly indebted to the late Koos van der Werff, professor emeritus of the University of Groningen, for his inspiring ideas.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


Appendix.

QSDP: Six Scales with Items, Item weights, Explained Variance and Cronbach’s α Coefficients per Age

Problem of Self-knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weights</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>29 It is difficult to know myself, because I don’t even know if I am myself. How do you ever know yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>11 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I actually don’t even know who I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>17 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I don’t know what really is part of me and what I’ve just learned to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>23 It is difficult to know myself, because I don’t know what really is part of me and what I’ve just learned to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>42 It is difficult to describe myself, because I’m not even sure whether I know myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>22 It is difficult to know myself, because everything I experience and do doesn’t give me enough idea of who I really am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>37 It is difficult to describe myself, because I don’t know what describes me better: my ideals or what I do with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>19 It is difficult to know myself, because there regularly turns out to be something that doesn’t fit the image I have of myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 7.95%, 11.79%, 11.00%, 12.14%; Cronbach’s α .81, .85, .81, .85)

Problem of Self-description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weights</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>40 It is difficult to describe myself, because I can hardly describe my real nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>41 It is difficult to describe myself, because the way I really am can’t be described to someone else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>47 It is difficult to describe myself, because I don’t really have anything to say about myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>43 It is difficult to describe myself, because when I try to explain who I am I get bogged down in superficial statements, and these only cover a small part of me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>38 It is difficult to describe myself, because when I think about myself, I can’t really find an adequate description.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>45 It is difficult to describe myself, because whatever I know about myself I’d rather keep to myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>48 It is difficult to describe myself, because there regularly turns out to be something that doesn’t fit the image I have of myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 7.30%, 10.01%, 10.25%, 10.35%; Cronbach’s α .73, .76, .76, .77)

Problem of Existential Vacuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weights</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>18 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because actually there’s nothing to ‘be’: you just play a role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>31 It is difficult to know myself, because actually there’s nothing to know; you just play a role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>36 It is difficult to describe myself, because actually there’s nothing to describe; you just play a role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>20 It is difficult to know myself, because when I think about myself, I can’t really find an adequate description.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>14 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because there isn’t anything behind the ‘mask’ I show to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>9 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because my life mainly consists of meaningless, superficial things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 5.70%, 10.32%, 9.96%, 12.10%; Cronbach’s α .65, .81, .78, .80)

Problem of Personal Authenticity

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<tr>
<th>Weights</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>1 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I have to conform too much to the people around me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>32 It is difficult to know myself, because the people I associate with have a different image of me than I do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>34 It is difficult to know myself, because everyone thinks so differently about me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>15 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because you have to play a certain role for the outside world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>8 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I’m not like people think I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>30 It is difficult to know myself, because I have the feeling that I’m actually different than I appear to be in daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>4 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because now and then I tend to present myself differently than I actually am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>13 It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I have the feeling I’m determined by things you can’t do anything about (like social position, how you look, age, health, etc.).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
(Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.20</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because things turn out to be differently from what I want them to be.

It is difficult to know myself, because I don't know what describes me better: my ideals or what I do with them.

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because it's so difficult to decide what I want to do with my life.

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because my life is dominated by one single characteristic.

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 8.63%, 11.55%, 12.03%, 13.67%; Cronbach's α .76, .83, .82, .85)

Problem of Multiplicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I sometimes seem to be different people at different times.

It is difficult to describe myself, because I have so many different facets I can hardly give a clear picture of myself.

It is difficult to describe myself, because I'm so changeable.

It is difficult to know myself, because I have all sorts of conflicting qualities.

It is difficult to know myself, because I have so many different facets I can hardly form a clear picture of myself.

It is difficult to know myself, because I'm so changeable.

It is difficult to describe myself, because I'm different in every situation.

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I keep showing myself from different angles.

It is difficult to know myself, because I'm different in every situation.

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 8.40%, 11.85%, 11.52%, 12.64%; Cronbach's α .83, .88, .88, .88)

Problem of Personal Continuity

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Item</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is difficult to know myself, because I've changed so much lately that I can hardly recognize myself sometimes.

It is difficult to describe myself, because I've changed so much lately that I can hardly recognize myself sometimes.

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I've changed so much lately that I can hardly recognize myself sometimes.

It is sometimes difficult to be myself, because I see what happens to me, but I can't do much to influence it.

It is difficult to know myself, because I sometimes discover things about myself that I didn't expect to find.

(Expl. var. for 17 yrs, 40 yrs, 55 yrs, and 70 yrs resp. 6.05%, 7.35%, 9.13%, 9.03%; Cronbach's α .76, .77, .79, .79)

**Note.** Weights after varimax and oblique rotation. The items are ordered by weight. The numbering of the items corresponds with the order in which they are administered in the QSDP.