Life-Span Trajectory of Self-Esteem Development: A Myth or Reality

Abdul Rahman bin Ahmad Badayai*[a], Khaidzir bin Haji Ismail*[b]

Tunku Abdul Rahman College, Kuala Lumpur*[a], National University of Malaysia, Bangi*[b]

ABSTRACT

Self-esteem has been regarded as one of the most pivotal component in almost every day human daily activities. Trajectory of self esteem development means that on the average, one's self-esteem is relatively high in childhood, then drops during adolescence, later to arise gradually throughout adulthood, and then declines sharply in old age. The purpose of this research is to study the trajectory of self-esteem development in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood during their developmental stages. The research had been conducted on 150 respondents, in which 63 males and 87 females participated in this study. Cross-sectional design and convenience sampling had been selected for the above proposed study. However, the findings of this research shows a gradual increase of one's self-esteem in old age which is in sharp contradiction to the present trajectory indicating that self esteem declines significantly during old age as stated in literature reviews of earlier researchers, but holds the same views on childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Despite the general developmental age differences across the human lifespan, an individual tends to maintain his/her ordering relative to one another; whereby individuals who have relatively high self-esteem at one point in time tend to have relatively high self-esteem years later on.

Keywords: life-span development, self-esteem.

Introduction

Self-esteem is a person's overall sense of worth and well-being. Self-esteem refers to the extent to which an individual value his or her self and believe that one has something to contribute (McWhirter, T.McWhirter, McWhirter, & J. McWhirter, 2004). According to Becker (1971a, 1973b) self-esteem is a psychological phenomenon created by humans as a buffer against the fear that is associated with the

knowledge of the inevitability of one's death. On the other hand, self-esteem is also been regarded as a culturally based construction that consists of viewing oneself as living up to specific contingencies of values, which are derived from culture at large but are integrated into a unique individualized worldview by each person (Pysczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel. 2004).

For decades, researchers have tried and debated to proved the self-esteem should be thought of as a trait-like construct that remains stable overtime or state-like construct that continuously fluctuates in which it interacts with the environment and situational changes and demands (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). It is stated that self-esteem is trait-like construct which is based on the meta-analysis results (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Thus, an individual who has relatively high self-esteem at one point in life tend to have high self-esteem years later; likewise those with low self-esteem earlier in life tend to have low self-esteem years later. Similarly, the trajectory of self-esteem across the life-span is more stable in some periods of life than in others. This fluctuation and stability seems to be relatively low in early childhood, increases in adolescence and early adulthood, and then declines in midlife and old age. (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005)

As an individual grows up and experience the life course, his or her self-esteem inevitably waxes and wanes. These fluctuations in self-esteem reflect changes in social environment as well as maturational changes taken place such as an onset of puberty; mostly by the physical changes and cognitive declines in old age. Thus, when these changes are experienced by most individuals at about the same age across the life-span and influence individuals in a similar manner, they will produce normative shifts in self-esteem trajectory across developmental periods. (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005)

However, much of the studies concerned about self-esteem is a distinctly an American phenomenon, in which it reflects an individualistic culture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008; Bellah et al., 1985). Thus, the differences and gap can be seen even greater for non-Western countries (Whiting & Edwards, 1988) as the Americans value high self-esteem to a greater extent than people in other countries (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008; Triandis, 1995). For instance, the Japanese culture, self-criticism is a virtue and high self-esteem is seen as a character problem (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). The expression of cultural ideologies may serve as a function of enhancing or reinforcing self-esteem as derived from cultural issues, thus contributing to the feeling of one's uniquely human existence (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008).

Prior to the above discussion, the researchers will be discussing the life-span trajectory of self-esteem development as well as ethnic and gender differences. The discussion also will take into account some critical analysis on the trajectory of self-esteem development in every single aspect of human development, in which hopes to answer the myth or reality of self-esteem essentialism.

Methods

- Research design

A survey was conducted to collect the data for this research. A set of Rosenberg Self-Esteem questionnaires was distributed amongst 150 respondents (N=150: 63 males, 87 females). Cross-sectional design and convenience sampling were selected for the purposed study.

- Participant

The participants consisted of 150 individuals (63 males, 87 females). The participants were divided into five cohorts; childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood (old age). The participants were recruited from Klang Valley and Kuantan district (Malaysia).

- Instrument

Self-esteem was assessed with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), the well-validated measure and most commonly used of self-esteem questionnaire. Responses were measured with a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (somewhat disagree), 3 (somewhat agree), and 4 (strongly agree). The reliability of the RSE was consistently 0.86. The RSE was translated to Malay language by using back translation and had been proofread before it was distributed amongst the respondents.
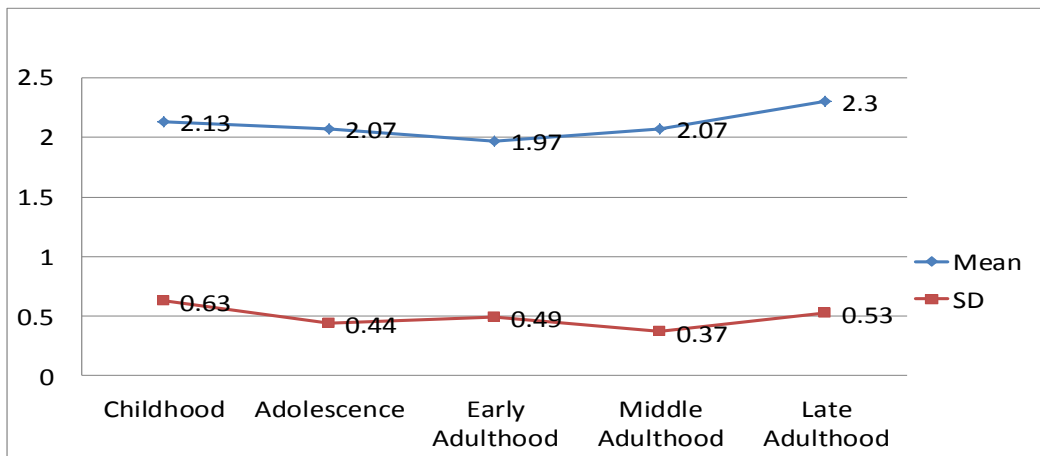
Results and Discussion

Fig. 1: Mean level of self-esteem across the life-span; childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.

There are a number of developmental reasons why self-esteem might follow the developmental pattern of a decline in early adolescence followed by a rise in late adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Based on the normative studies (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005), self-esteem during childhood relatively high because they tend to make unrealistically favorable self-attributes and overestimate their own abilities. Thus, children mostly rely on the external comment and social comparisons in order to form more accurate appraisal of their competences and abilities (Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, Davis-Kean and Sandler (2001) assumed that children's evaluation of self is not sensitive to specific context, and as the consequence, the measures of self-esteem in children typically make little distinction between contexts of self-esteem in children; school, home, peer. Thus, from the above finding, the mean-level of self-esteem in childhood is relatively higher then adolescence (M=2.13, SD=0.63).

Kail and Cavanaugh (2009) stated that, as children progress through primary school to secondary school, self-esteem becomes particularly well defined. However, as they reached adolescence, self-esteem continues to decline. This can be seen in the above figure 1 as clearly stated that the mean-level

of self-esteem in adolescence is (M=2.07, SD=0.44). Several reasons to explain the finding, it could be due to the onset of puberty, adolescence might experience either negative or positive occurrence as well as continues to receive negative feedbacks and comments on his or her physical appearances, academic achievement, peer relationships and so on. This transition can be more challenging and socially complex, thus it might lead to storm and stress period. Moreover, Dhal, Bhatia, Sharma, and Gupta (2007) also stated that early adolescents reported higher self-esteem as compared to later adolescents, which holds the same views with previous researches.

Although self-esteem tends to decline from preadolescence to adolescence, to some people it rises during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2009). There are a number of reasons why self-esteem increases over this period (young adulthood). Physical appearance is important to adolescents' self-esteem, and by emerging adulthood, they have passed through the awkward changes of puberty and have gained self-confidence in how they look (Arnett 2003; Galambos et al., 2006; O'Connor, Allen, Bell & Hauser, 1996). Others such as feeling accepted and approved by parents, in which consequently the relationship between parent-child generally improve, leaving the social pressure and evaluation by peers and friends, and lastly the ability to reach more control over social contexts of everyday life (Arnett, 2009; Gavin & Furman, 1989). Over the course of adulthood, individuals increasingly occupy positions of power and status, which might in returns promote feelings of self-worth. Many theorists have suggested that, midlife is characterized by peaks in achievement, mastery, and control over self and environment (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). This somewhat true as stated in the findings, in which the mean-level of self-esteem in early adulthood (M=1.97, SD=0.49) gradually increases and reaches its peak in middle adulthood (M=2.07, SD=0.37).

Self-esteem in old age starts to decline. The declination may be due to the dramatic confluence of changes that occur in old age such as physical functioning (e.g., health problems), changes in roles (e.g., retirement), socioeconomic status or even relationship (e.g., the loss of a spouse) (Robin & Trzesniewski, 2005). Moreover, certain domain-level in self-esteem such as, physical self-worth, perceived attractiveness, strength, and condition are anticipated to decrease one's self-esteem level, and thus change the trajectory. (Gothe et al., 2011)

However, the finding indicated the contradicting result, in which the self-esteem in old age continues to incline (M=2.3, SD=0.53). This could reflect a shift toward a more modest, humble, and balanced view of the self in old age. Nevertheless, individuals in old age who accept and internalize the occurrences and changes positively and regard it as natural causes, might well accept his or her conditions in old age. Many assume that the personal and social losses at old age associated with deterioration of one's well-being subsequently lead to the decline of self-esteem. However, one may know not that to some aging adults, can negotiate the many threats presented to living a long life and thus, to gain perfect and blissful life experiences.
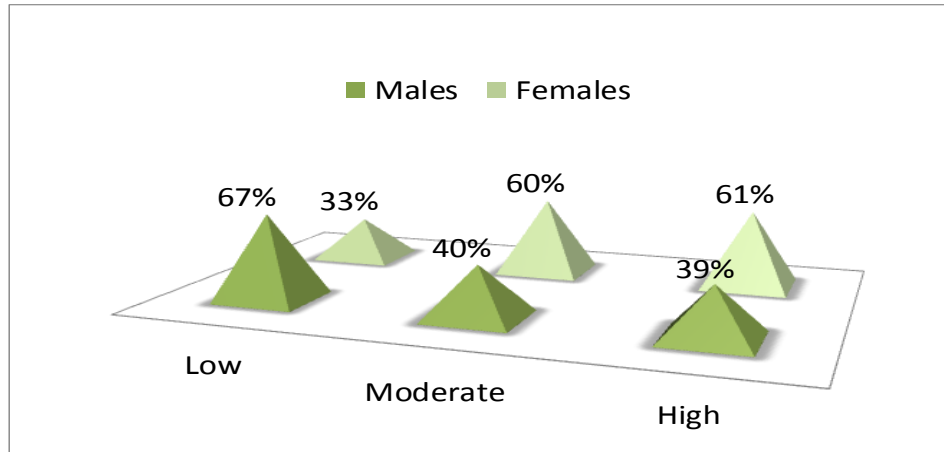
Fig. 2: Mean level of self-esteem between genders. Also plotted are differences by level of self-esteem; low, moderate, and high, separately for males and females.

Generally, the overall self-esteem trajectory of males and females are similar. For both genders, self-esteem is relatively high in childhood, drops during adolescence and rises in adulthood. However, in the findings, females show significantly higher score of self-esteem in moderate level (60%) and high level (61%). On the other hand, males' score higher in low level of self-esteem (67%). These findings yet again contradict the literature, as stated by Kling, Hyde, Showers and Buswell (1999); Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, and Potter (2002), a gender gap emerges by adolescence, such that adolescent boys have higher self-esteem than adolescent girls. This gap seems to be persistent throughout adulthood and disappears towards the old age (Kling et al., 1999; Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). As such, the distinction of level of self-esteem between males and females could be caused by different emphasis on different domains such as physical appearance, social acceptance, behavioral conduct, academic achievement, and so on (Arneet, 2009). For instance, this helps explain why girls' self-esteem in physical domain is more likely to decline as they enter early adolescence. Reaching puberty means becoming more womanly, and its mean gaining more weight.

Numerous explanations would be sensible to explain the gap between genders differences. The ranging from the onset of puberty and maturational changes in physical, emotional, cognitive and social-contextual factors always associated with these differences. Moreover, the self-esteem could also be caused by the occurrences experienced by both males and females, such as storm and stress periods and positive life development through the adolescence life. These depend on the social-environment contexts in which the adolescents live in.
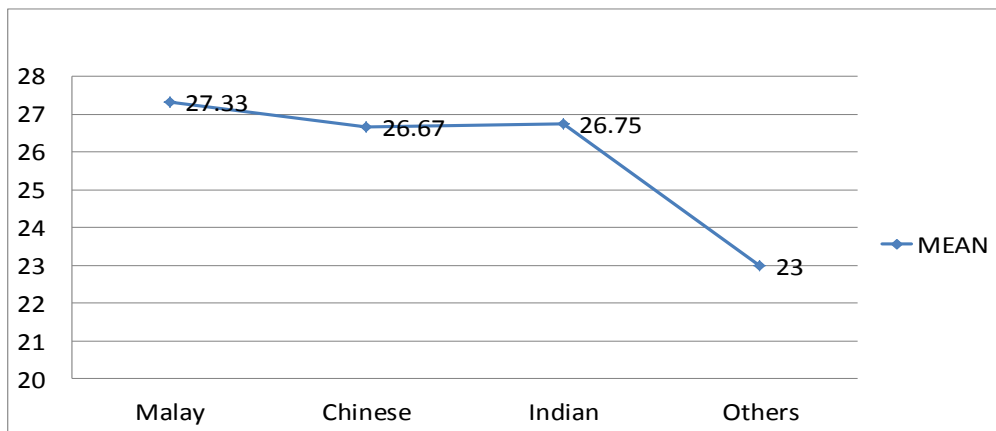
Fig. 3: Mean level of self-esteem between ethnic groups.

The above finding shows that, there are no significant differences on self-esteem level across ethnic groups; Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The other ethnic groups (other than Malay, Chinese, and Indian) show a sharp decline. Even so, the self-esteem of all ethnic groups is relatively high. There are numerous findings on the culture and ethnicity on self-esteem. Early cross-cultural researches on self-esteem, reported that members of individualistic cultures, such as Americans and Canadians are accentuated on the importance of self-enhanced, however not for Asians (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). Even amongst those in collectivistic culture, such as Japanese, Chinese, Malay, Indian and so on might have some gap in regards to the domain of self-esteem. This might be caused by the specific-cultural environmental context in which they live in.

Despite the fact that members of individualistic culture value self-enhance than Asians, recent research strongly suggests that people of either collectivistic or individualistic cultures express or value self-enhance in different ways. For instance, certain domain of self-esteem might be treated and judged differently in different contexts (Heine, 2005). Another research conducted by Tafarodi and Swann (1996), found that Chinese students were lower in self-competence, but high in generalized self-liking. Thus, it is support the notion that self-esteem may have multiple facets, and also the perceptual differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008).

In addition, Arnett (2009) also stated that, differences in self-esteem might be seen in different domain such as in physical appearance. African American females evaluate their physical appearance quite differently compared to White females do (Dubois et al., 1996; Greene & Way, 2005; Mendelson et al., 2000). Moreover, some findings suggested that Asian and Black young women evaluated themselves according to skin color, as with those relatively dark skin might having negative perceptions of their attractiveness (Bond & Cash, 1992; Sahay & Piran, 1997). Consequently, the ethnic and culture differences in perceived physical appearance supports the belief that cultures somehow significant to the different level of self-esteem.

Critical Analysis on the Trajectory of Self-esteem Development

To some extent, people might refute self-esteem as a mere bogus of self-evaluation that has less significance on an individual's life-span. Until today, the self-esteem had been caught in a quagmire of

conflicting findings. Despite the arguments on the developmental trajectory, self-esteem still can be seen as the key indicator to life successes and catastrophes. These successes and devastations experienced by one in his or her life would be much pretentious by individual's level of self-esteem. Prior to that, self-esteem has usually been regarded as a cause than consequence factor (Orth, Robins & Widaman, 2012). The question of either self-esteem is a cause or a consequence yields a great deal amongst scholars especially in the interventions that aimed at boosting self-esteem. Many studies on self-esteem are based on correlational design. Means that, a correlation between X and Y could mean that X causes Y and vice versa. If only self-esteem causes an assortment of positive outcome, then it will be worth to instill high self-esteem into children or vulnerable at-risk adolescents. In contrast, if the self-esteem is an outcome of life achievement or good behavior, then it is insignificant to raising self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003).

Therefore, if the self-esteem is an outcome rather than cause, then it could flop and lead to produce undesirable effects. For instance, working hard in college or university leads to a good grade, subsequently it will lead to high self-esteem. Noted, that high self-esteem of feeling good serves as pivotal reinforcement to study hard, which in turns lead to academic success. If only a program intervenes to promote high self-esteem amongst students regardless of their academic performance, then the students would relish the rewards of self-esteem without making any effort. As such, the debates of self-esteem either a cause or a consequence remain vague and uncertain. Thus, auxiliary and extensive research could be carried out to certainly answer the question of either cause or consequence.

Regardless of the cause and consequence issue of self-esteem, the researchers found that the self-evaluation of either someone is good, bad, excellent or vice versa is a mere cognitive reflections. This has been long-established by Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) asserted that, self-esteem is a perception rather than reality. It refers to a person's belief and perception about one's ability and capability in life. The belief that people might have shape his or her actions in many ways, and thus these actions in turn would shape the individuals' social reality of the people around them. This belief can be fabricated or even factual about one's self.

Nevertheless, self-esteem could also be the product of environmental conditions and social life events that might influence the level of one's self-esteem over time. Hence, self-esteem is formed through experiences with the environment and is especially influenced by environmental reinforcements and significant others (Johnson, 2011; Dhal, Bhatia, Sharma & Gupta, 2007). Thus, it can be understood that, there are third variable that could lead to the discrepancy of life-span trajectory of self-esteem development. On the other hand, different notions about self-esteem lead to different conclusion on the effects and impacts of self-esteem have on individual's life and thus different understandings that we have on the self-esteem development.

Apart from that, one critical question to be answered is, does self-esteem development has a universal trajectory across the life-span? The trajectories of self-esteem throughout the life-span development are waxes and wanes. As the result, it leads to the high and low scores of self-esteem at certain point of age in one's life-span. The exact pattern of the trajectory of self-esteem development seems to be disagreement amongst scholars.

Remarkably, the researchers did not find any universal trajectory or normative curve of self-esteem in any existing literatures. Many possible reasons could be used to explain the discrepancies of

the self-esteem trajectory development. Firstly, different types of instruments, different items were used to measure self-esteem. For instance, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE) and Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI). Some items are more sensitive to certain age of people, but not to the other. This somehow is true as indicated by Pullmann, Allik and Realo (2009) that older participants agreed less frequently on the statement about feeling useless from time to time compared to younger participants.

Secondly, the domains of self-esteem emphasized in the questionnaire are valued differently by the individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). For instance African American females evaluated their physical appearance quite differently compared to White females do (Dubois et al., 1996; Greene & Way, 2005; Mendelson et al., 2000). The similar finding also had been found by Tafarodi and Swann (1996), Chinese students were lower in self-competence, but high in generalized self-liking. This conception has been supported and as the result, it is hardly to get a consensus on the trajectory of self-esteem development, especially for both individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Thirdly, the research design selected for the previous studies was also one of the reasons to have the disagreement among researchers and scholars on the life-span trajectory of self-esteem. Numbers of researches used correlational design, either cross-sectional or longitudinal studies. It means that, no absolute inferences could be made on the self-esteem trajectory. Fourthly, the trajectory of self-esteem development could be also affected by a third variable embedded in the environment in which the individuals live in. This is somewhat true when the self-esteem is not the cause but rather the consequence of other behaviors and interactions. Lastly, the samples studied were non-representative to the population. In the existing literature, either all American with individualistic culture or Asian, African, Hispanic with collectivistic culture are yet to be considered in the current studies.

In addition to the above discoveries, the researchers will extend the critical discussion to two significant areas; self-esteem and positive life achievement, and self-esteem and problem behaviors. The purpose of having the discussion is to scrutinize the low and high of self-esteem development in living human beings.

Self-esteem and positive life achievement

There are plausible reasons to assume the effect of low and high of self-esteem on various areas of human life achievement; school performance, job and task performance, interpersonal relations and to name a few. In general, individuals with high self-esteem may set higher aspirations than individuals who have low self-esteem. Many studies found positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance (Orth, Trzesniewski & Robins, 2010; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Wylie, 1979). The similar conclusions has also been made by Davies and Brember (1999), they found that there were weak positive relationships between self-esteem and academic performance.

However, there is evidence that there was no direct causal of self-esteem and academic achievement (Bowles, 1999). Therefore, it's hard to conclude the effects of self-esteem have on achievement. Still some other researchers have concluded that, the correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement are small as to be not worth pursuing, though the statistical analysis showed the accuracy, but somehow the practical significance is negligible (Rubin, Dorle & Sandidge, 1977). Generally,

the findings on correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement were positive but weak and ambiguous. A student with high self-esteem will somewhat do better in school achievement than those with low self-esteem.

Self-esteem relates to other positive life experience, such as parent-child relations. According to DeHart, Pelham, and Tennen (2006) children who are received affection, acceptance, security, and support from their parents show higher levels of self-esteem than those who do not. Besides, peers influence and relationship are both significant to the life of young people, as it could boost his or her self-esteem. Nesdale and Lambert (2007) claimed that peer acceptance is a particularly powerful influence, as the children start school. Because peers become especially prominent in the social world of adolescents, in which they gain considerable power over self-esteem.

On the other hand, in a work place setting, self-esteem place much concern that worker who feels better about his or her self would end up with better performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Orth, Robins and Widaman (2012), also stated that individuals who reported to have high self-esteem subsequently to experience higher levels of job satisfaction, salary, positive affect, relationship satisfaction and even health. The result seems to reverberate what has been found with school performance and parent-child relations. However, the correlational results do not indicate whether it is a cause or a consequence of school performance. Thus, the most important point is that correlational findings do not permit any causal inferences.

Self-esteem and problem behaviors

Despite the affirmative of self-esteem in life achievement and success, self-esteem on the other hand could lead to deleterious life events. The results of either high or low self-esteem leads to problem behaviors are still mixed. According to Kaplan's Self-Derogation Theory, suggested that problem behaviors were positively associated with the growth of self-esteem. It means that, high self-esteem would susceptibly leads to problem behaviors not so for low self-esteem (Mason, 2001). However, there are reversed finding by Lee and Lee (2012), claimed that problem behaviors such as delinquency was negatively associated with growth in self-esteem.

The effects of self-esteem on problem behaviors may depend on which domains of self-esteem are high and low (Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004). Multiple risk behaviors in adolescence of both sexes were associated with low self-esteem in family and school domains and high self-esteem in peer domain. Even so, numerous researches and findings indicated that at-risk youth are to be associated with low self-esteem. This has been studied by DuBois and Silverthorn (2004), adolescents with low self-esteem in early stage predicted associated with deviant peers, which in turn related to risk behaviors.

According to Huitt (2009); Kim and Cicchetti (2009), self-esteem has been found to negatively correlate with anxiety, illness and school failure during childhood (as cited in Johnson, 2011). Even so, low self-esteem was associated with feelings of loneliness. Thus, the children are more likely to experience rejection and are disapproval by others (Dhal, Bhatia, Sharma, & Gupta, 2007). It would also be associated with secure attachment, and on the other hand, low self-esteem was associated with fearful attachment styles. Another research conducted by Boden, Fergusson and Horwood (2008) revealed that low self-esteem were much associated with psychopathology such as, mental health problems, substance abuse and also to affect one's quality of life particularly in relationship satisfaction.

Roberts, Gotlib and Kassel (1996) also conducted a research and concluded that low self-esteem was associated with increases in depressive symptoms, and yet to suggested that the low self-esteem could be caused by insecure adult's attachment and dysfunctional attitudes. In addition to that, there are certain degrees of sized effects of self-esteem on one's behaviors, which are small, medium or large sized effects. As suggested by Orth, Robins and Widaman (2012), low self-esteem has medium-sized effects on life-span trajectories of affection and depression. However, there was no direct association between low self-esteem and risk behaviors.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the present research contributes to the understanding of self-esteem development from childhood to old age. Factors such as age, gender and ethnicity were of particular importance in explaining the life-span trajectory of self-esteem development. Other variables such as culture and the role of cognition are to be emphasized and recognized in examining the trajectory of self-esteem development. Ever since, the low and high self-esteem's score would susceptibly cause by the individual-environment reciprocal interaction. In addition, individuals cannot disdain the significance of self-esteem has on one's life, either towards life achievements or life adversity. However, the existing literature on self-esteem development lacks on overarching theoretical framework. A concrete foundation of either trait-like or state-like as well as self-esteem as a cause or consequence should be based on a robust research over time. Thus, it is our hope, by examining the patterns of life-span self-esteem development would contribute to the expansion of knowledge in the related field.

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