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Self-structure and Well-being in Life Transitions

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Two studies examined the effects of self-congruence and negative elaboration on life transitions. Study 1 involved college students considering the transition from college to careers. Students with greater self-congruence reported decreased dejection and higher quality of life. Students with high negative elaboration reported greater dejection and lower quality of life. Students with high self-congruence and low negative elaboration had higher self-esteem than students with high self-congruence but high negative elaboration. Study 2, a prospective study of new mothers, showed that low self-congruence during pregnancy was associated with higher postpartum dejection, but only for mothers with high negative elaboration. Together, these studies indicate that self-congruence promotes, and negative elaboration impairs, well-being. Furthermore, negative elaboration may moderate the effects of self-congruence. For impending transitions (college to career) negative elaboration may decrease the benefit of high self-congruence, and for completed transitions (becoming a mother) negative elaboration may exacerbate the liability of low self-congruence.

The 1980s witnessed a rapid shift in the social psychological view of the self from a unitary entity (e.g., Wylie, 1974), to a cognitive structure consisting of multiple elements (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987). This theoretical approach, inspired by classic writings of James (1890) and Mead (1934/1962), raised questions about the structural properties of the self, and how these structural properties might be related to psychological well-being. In this paper we show how two structural properties—self-congruence and negative elaboration—affect quality of life, self-esteem, and dejection among populations contemplating or undergoing life transitions. We do so using a data collection and analytic method tailored to this kind of inquiry that was developed by De Boeck and Rosenberg (1988) and refined by Gara, Woolfolk, and colleagues (Gara et al. 1993; Woolfolk, Novalany, Gara, Allen, & Polino, 1995).

Self-structure and Life Transitions

The effects of self-structure on well-being may be especially powerful during major life transitions (Ruble & Seidman, 1996). Although people are arguably in a constant state of flux—"protean," as Lifton (1993) has observed—culturally defined

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transitions create disturbances that often compel people to examine and question their social roles, relationships, status, and core identities. Meeting the demands of these multiple social expectations can be a formidable challenge. One such challenge is that of integrating new skills, attitudes, and social labels within the preexisting self-concept (Zirkel, 1992). Newly acquired attributes and standards do not always align with long-held self-images, and this disjunction may produce an uncomfortable dissonance for the individual. Further, transitions often involve missteps, confusion, and negative social feedback as new routines are learned, new people are encountered, and new ideal standards emerge (Ruble & Seidman, 1996; Showers & Ryff, 1996). Having experienced a moment of incompetence or embarrassment, people in transition might wonder whether these are momentary set-backs, or more fundamental incompatibilities between themselves and their new social roles.

To paraphrase McAdams (1988), people in transition might ask, "Who was I before, who am I now, and who will I be as I enter this new period in my life?" They might wonder whether their basic selves are competent to negotiate their transitions, whether difficulties in managing transitions indicate weaknesses in their selves, and, perhaps most crucially, whether the new or emerging roles that transitions present fit with their core identities (whether they "feel right"; Higgins, 2005). The self, then, becomes the fulcrum upon which transitions are leveraged. How the self is built, and what it is built of, should therefore be especially important during transitional periods.

This research considers the role that two features of the self-structure—self-congruence and negative elaboration—have in negotiating life transitions. Specifically, it relates these variables separately and jointly to the experience of career preparation in college (Study 1) and to becoming a first-time mother (Study 2). The remainder of this introduction discusses the nature, function, and measurement of self-congruence and negative elaboration.

Self-congruence

Self-congruence has for several decades been widely cited as an indicator of psychological self-acceptance and well-being. A congruent self is one whose aspects are in psychological harmony with a central, "actual" self (Lecky, 1945; Rogers, 1961), and is therefore relatively free from internal psychological tension. For example, a person who sees her core, actual self as inquisitive and expressive, who works as an investigative reporter, and whose mate values spirited conversations would likely experience high self-congruence (and therefore positive well-being). Traits that express her core self also characterize her work life and her home life, thus her values, aptitudes, and experiences in these roles are aligned with the way she believes she "really" is. In Turner's (1978) terms, her subjective experience of these roles would merge into her more general sense of herself. This has broad consequences: A congruent self provides a blueprint for the clearest and least conflicted plans for action ("unequivocal behavioral orientation," Jones & Gerard, 1967; see also Schlenker, 1985), and represents a critical psychological achievement necessary for the full integration of the individual into society (Baumeister, 1987; Erikson, 1968).

Self-congruence promotes well-being. A substantial body of research has shown that congruence between social roles and the actual self advances coping and adjustment. Self-congruence predicts increased life satisfaction and role commitment

(Ogilvie, 1987; Reich, 2000; Reich & Rosenberg, 2004; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), and reduced dejection and agitation (Hart, Field, Garfinkle, & Singer, 1997; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003; Higgins, 1989). Conversely, incongruence between actual self and a social role has been related to dysphoria, inauthenticity, and psychopathology both in the theoretical literature (Backman, 1988; Carson, 1969; Erickson, 1995; Hochschild, 1983) and in empirical investigations (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Hart et al., 1997; Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Swann, 1987).

The literature on self-congruence is conceptually related to other self-structure theories of well-being. Research on self determination theory has shown that action that is integrated with the self, unlike externally imposed action, is intrinsically motivated, satisfies basic needs of autonomy, competence, and interpersonal relatedness, and promotes positive psychological development (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Campbell (1990) has similarly shown that when specific behaviors and general self-concept correspond, esteem is higher, but when they conflict, esteem is lower. This was confirmed in subsequent work (Campbell et al., 1996; Campbell, Assanand, & DiPaula, 2003), which found that self-esteem was related to high self-concept clarity. As a measure of internal consistency of self-beliefs, self-concept clarity is similar to self-congruence in that both are indices of psychological integration (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Negative Elaboration

People's self-structures involve not only the manner in which various self-aspects are organized, but also the qualities or traits that comprise these self-aspects. Drawing on prior theoretical literature (Gara, Rosenberg, & Cohen, 1987; Rosenberg, 1993; Rosenberg & Gara, 1985) and seminal empirical work (Gara, 1990; Gara, Rosenberg, & Mueller, 1989; Robey, Cohen, & Gara, 1989), Gara et al. (1993) introduced the notion of *negative elaboration* to research this qualitative dimension of self-structure. An individual's self-structure is negatively elaborated to the extent that diverse negative traits are dispersed across multiple self-aspects. For example, if Jack describes himself as *impatient* as a teacher, *confrontational* as a town council member, and *suspicious* as a husband, he would be demonstrating negative elaboration, because a variety of distinct negative traits occupy different social roles. It is important to note that negative elaboration is not determined only by the number of negative traits, but rather by the extent to which these traits are distributed across self-aspects. If Jack had used the terms *impatient*, *confrontational*, and *suspicious* only to describe himself as a town council member, but not in any other role, he would have a less negatively elaborated self-structure than he would in our first example. He would have the same number of negative traits (i.e., 3) but they would be restricted to only one social role.

Negative elaboration impairs well-being. In the first empirical test of the association between negative elaboration and well-being, Gara et al. (1993) found that high negative elaboration effectively discriminated depressed patients from controls, and indeed that negative elaboration was the strongest predictor of high Beck Depression Inventory scores among the depressed patients. That is, people whose self-structures contained multiple negative traits spread across multiple self-aspects were more likely to be depressed. This structural measure was significantly related to depression even after controlling for the raw frequency of negative and

positive traits in the patients' self-descriptions. This result indicated that it is the *organization* of negative traits (i.e., their distribution across self-aspects), and not simply the mere quantity of negative traits, that determines well-being. In two subsequent studies, Woolfolk and colleagues (Woolfolk et al., 1995, Study 6; Woolfolk et al., 1999) demonstrated that higher negative elaboration predicted poorer recovery from a major depressive episode over 9 months. Guided by these studies, our hypotheses focus on negative elaboration as a predictor of well-being in a life transition.

Measuring self-congruence and negative elaboration

Self-congruence and negative elaboration are simultaneously and economically captured in a conceptual model of self-structure developed by Rosenberg and Gara (1985) and Rosenberg (1997). According to this *set theoretical* model, people typically maintain several distinct identities, or "self-aspects." Each self-aspect is associated with a particular set of traits that characterize it and give expression to it. Any two self-aspects may share the same set of traits, or they may share only some traits but not others, or may have no traits in common at all. Thus, for Jack (in the example above), *teacher*, *town council member*, and *husband* exist as some of his self-aspects, and *impatient*, *confrontational*, and *suspicious* are some of the traits that characterize these self-aspects. These traits may apply to just one, or two, or all three of Jack's self-aspects. As we will demonstrate, self-congruence derives from the relations between self-aspects, and negative elaboration from the distribution of traits across self-aspects.

The set theoretical model and self-congruence. Self-congruence is conceptually defined in the present research as the degree to which a person's *actual self* is in accord with his or her other self-aspects. "Actual self" refers to a person's core, fundamental, or essential self (Higgins, 1989; Ogilvie, 1987). To the extent that the attributes of the actual self are shared by other self-aspects (e.g., parent, citizen, employee), self-congruence is greater. To the extent they are not, self-congruence is weaker.

The set theoretical model determines congruence by arranging a person's actual self, and their other self-aspects, into a structure in terms of their shared and non-shared traits. A given self-aspect may subsume one or more other self-aspects. Suppose, for example, that a man describes his actual self as traditional, caring, loving, authoritative, impatient, confrontational, and suspicious. When asked to describe himself as a father, he again uses these seven traits; as a husband, traditional, caring, and loving; as a teacher, authoritative; and as a town council member, impatient, confrontational, and suspicious. A set theoretical model of this person's self-structure (shown as "Person A" in Figure 1) places "actual self" and "father" on a hierarchical level above that of "husband," "teacher," and "town council member." This is because all traits attributed to "husband," "teacher," or "town council member" also apply to "actual self" and "father," but not vice versa. For this person "actual self" is placed in the same class as "father" because these two self-aspects share the same set of traits. Note that self-aspects appear in the top half of Person A's structure, and traits appear in the bottom half of Person A's structure.

"Person B" in Figure 1 displays a different pattern of self-descriptions. For him, "actual self" subsumes only "husband" and "teacher," sharing the traits caring, loving, and suspicious with the former, and impatient, authoritative, and traditional with the latter. "Town council member" is described as confrontational,

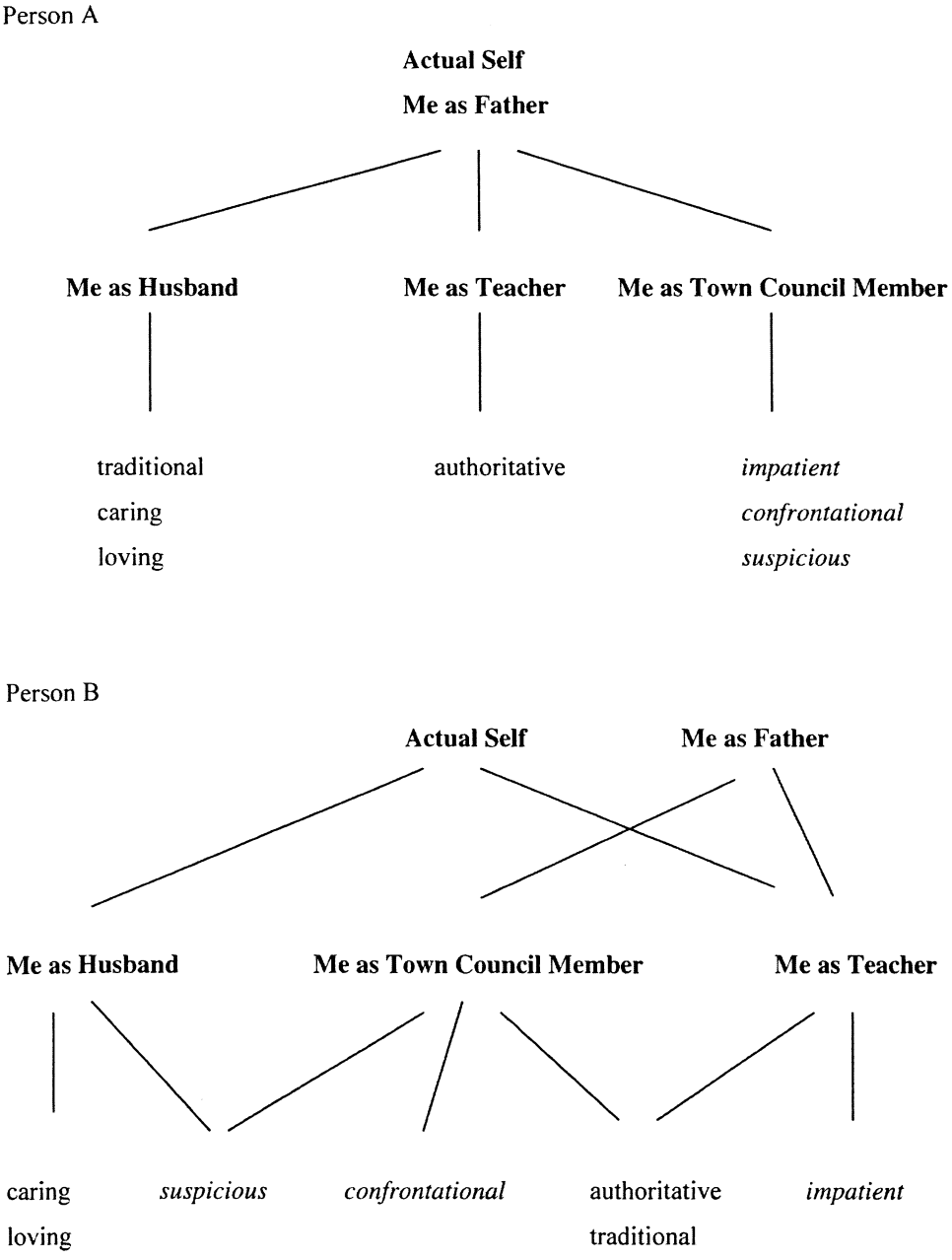

FIGURE 1 A set theoretical model of two individuals' self-structures. *Note*: Negative trait classes are shown in italics.

authoritative, traditional, and suspicious, but since its traits are not a proper subset of those contained in "actual self"—where confrontational does not apply—there is no line linking the two. Similarly, "father" is not subsumed under "actual self" for Person B, because confrontational appears in the former but not the latter.

We operationalized self-congruence as the number of self-aspects either subsumed by, or in the same class as, actual self. For Person A, this number would be

4 ("father," "husband," "teacher," and "town council member"). Person B's self-congruence score would be 2 ("husband" and "teacher"). Consistent with the literature on self-congruence, this model assumes that self-aspects sharing traits with actual self are experienced as psychologically close to, and expressive of, what one takes to be his of her true self. By this logic, behaving in a confrontational manner as a father or town council member would lead to a self-congruent experience for person A, but not for person B.

The set theoretical model and negative elaboration. As mentioned, negative elaboration represents the degree to which negative traits are distributed across various self-aspects. The set theoretical model indexes this distribution by arranging traits into classes, based on the co-occurrence of traits across self-aspects. Two traits that correspond to different self-aspects are placed into distinct classes (trait classes are represented in the bottom half of Person A's and Person B's structure). For Person A, traditional, loving, and caring co-appear in "husband," "father," and "actual self," but none of these traits appears in "teacher" or "town council member." Because the self-aspects in which these traits appear (and do not appear) are identical, these traits are assigned to the same trait class. Note that for Person B, authoritative and traditional are located in a different class from caring and loving, because these two groups of traits do not describe identical sets of self-aspects. We index negative elaboration by counting the number of trait classes comprised of negative traits (shown in italics in Figure 1). Person A's negative elaboration score would be 1, whereas Person B's score would be 3; Person B has the more highly differentiated set of negative self-beliefs.

In sum, the set theoretical model explicitly represents self-congruence in terms of the alignment of a person's subsidiary self-aspects with the actual self, which is consistent with theoretical definitions (Schlenker, 1985; Turner, 1978). Negative elaboration is indexed by the number of negative trait classes in the self-structure, which is consistent with its theoretical definition (Gara et al., 1993).

The Set Theoretical Model and Life Transitions

The procedure used in the present studies offers an effective method for addressing the joint effects of self-congruence and negative elaboration on negotiating life transitions. We use this procedure to address the following questions: Can people with a congruent, integrated self-structure be happy and enjoy greater esteem as they pass through a life transition, even if this self-structure is loaded with a differentiated set of negative traits? Or, do happiness and self-esteem primarily depend on lumping together all of one's negative traits (cf. Showers, 1992a, on evaluative integration), even for those whose overall level of congruence is lower? Are the effects of self-congruence and negative elaboration on transitions additive or interactive? These questions have not, to our knowledge, been empirically investigated. The present research examines these questions among populations contemplating a life transition: college students preparing for their careers, and women becoming first-time mothers.

Study 1

In this study we modeled data from college students according to the set theoretical framework previously outlined, to test the hypothesis that feelings of dejection

are associated with low self-congruence and high negative elaboration, and that self-esteem and quality of life are associated with high self-congruence and low negative elaboration. Given that career aspirations are typically a key concern for college students (Marcia, 1980), we included several career-related self-aspects in our target list in addition to actual self. Also included in the target list were reflected appraisals (Reich & Rosenberg, 2004), ideal and ought selves (Higgins, 1989), relationship identities (Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991), anticipated selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and the undesired self (Ogilvie, 1987).

The design of this study is "single-shot" in that we simultaneously obtain self-structure data and measures of well-being. For this reason Study 1 is best regarded as a preliminary test of associations between these measures.

Method

Participants

Ninety-five students enrolled in upper-level psychology courses at Rutgers University (59 women and 36 men, mean age = 21.32, $SD = 4.52$) participated in this study for course credit.

Procedure

Questionnaire packets were distributed to large groups in lecture halls. Participants first supplied demographic information. They then completed 13 self-ratings forms, each form targeted to one of the following self-aspects: *the kind of person I actually am*; *me as a student*; *me as a member of my family*; *the way most people see me*; *me working toward my career goal*; *the way I ought to be (to meet my duties and obligations)*; *me with my closest same-sex friend*; *the way people see me as I pursue my career goal*; *the kind of person I would like to be*; *me with my boyfriend/girlfriend*; *me in my favorite hobby/leisure time activity*; *me in the future, having already arrived at my career goal*; and *the self I don't want to be*. Two other targets, *a career role model* and *people I don't like*, were also included (the latter to elicit negative trait attributions), but were not used to calculate self-congruence (described below). Each self-aspect form contained the same 44 trait terms, representing each of the Big Five domains (e.g., *emotionally stable*, *disagreeable*, *traditional*), and power, intimacy, and achievement strivings (e.g., *strong*, *caring*, *afraid to fail*; McAdams, 1988). Fifteen of the traits on this list (34%) were negative (see the Appendix for the complete list of traits).

Participants selected those traits that fitted with the particular self-aspect they were describing. For example, when describing the self-aspect "me with my closest same-sex friend" a participant might select the traits *agreeable* and *caring*, but later select the trait *afraid to fail* when describing "me working toward my career goal." There was no limit on how many traits could be selected for any self-aspect, or how many times a trait could be selected for the entire set of self-aspects.

After completing the self-aspect forms, participants completed the Beck Depression Inventory, which served as a measure of dejection (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). They also completed a quality of life (QOL) measure (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and M. Rosenberg's (1979) Self-esteem measure.

Structural analysis of self-descriptive data. Each student's self-descriptive data were converted to a binary matrix, with each row corresponding to a self-aspect and

each column representing a trait (1 = trait *j* associated with self-aspect *i*, 0 otherwise). Each matrix was individually analyzed using HICLAS (De Boeck & Rosenberg, 1988; De Boeck, Rosenberg, & Van Mechelen, 1993). HICLAS places self-aspects (rows) into self-aspect classes based on their shared and non-shared traits (columns), and simultaneously places traits into trait classes in terms of their co-occurrence across self-aspects. Two self-aspects are placed into the same class if they share the same set of traits. One self-aspect subsumes another if its traits are a superset of those contained in the other. Two traits are placed into the same class if they are attributed to the same set of self-aspects, and are located in different classes if they are attributed to different sets of self-aspects.

Self-congruence. As indicated earlier, we operationally defined self-congruence as the number of self-aspects that were structurally equivalent to "actual me" (i.e., in the same class with "actual me"), or subordinate to "actual me." We indexed degree of self-congruence by counting the number of self-aspects that met these criteria, and therefore a high score reflected high self-congruence. Participants' self-congruence scores ranged from 0 to 13, $M = 5.42$ ($SD = 3.99$). To focus specifically on career self-congruence, we created a binary code indicating whether actual me was congruent with either of the two current career self-aspects, "me in my career goal" and "the way others see me in my career goal." Fifty-three participants (55.8%) perceived congruence between their actual selves and their career goals, according to this index.

Negative elaboration. We used HICLAS to locate classes comprised of distinct sets of negative traits. Our rule was to label a trait class as "negative" if more than half of its terms were negative.[1] Negative elaboration was indexed as the number of negative trait *classes* (not simply the number of negative traits) in the participant's HICLAS output. Negative elaboration ranged from 0 to 3, $M = 1.38$ ($SD = 0.88$).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Women scored higher than men on the BDI, $M = 9.81$ vs. $M = 5.93$, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$. Older participants scored lower on the BDI, $r = -.23$, $p < .05$, higher on the self-esteem measure, $r = .26$, $p < .01$, and marginally higher on QOL, $r = .18$, $p < .10$. Thus, we treated both age and sex as control variables in our regression analyses. Correlations among major variables are shown in Table 1.

Self-structure and Dejection, Quality of Life, and Self-esteem

Dejection (BDI). Table 2 shows that overall self-congruence and negative elaboration independently predicted BDI after controlling for age and sex. Specifically, as predicted, low self-congruence and high negative elaboration were each associated with high BDI scores. We found no evidence for an interaction between these variables, $sr = .01$, $p = .90$, or between either variable and sex, $sr = -.13$ for Sex × Self-congruence and $sr = .12$ for Sex × Negative Elaboration, $ps > .23$.

A similar result obtained for career self-congruence (see Table 2). Again, as predicted, low career self-congruence and high negative elaboration were each

TABLE 1 Zero-order Correlations Among Major Variables in Study 1

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-congruence	–				
2. Career self-congruence	.62**	–			
3. Negative elaboration	.20*	.12	–		
4. Dejection	−.21*	−.20*	.20*	–	
5. Quality of life	.31**	.15	−.16	−.56**	–
6. Self-esteem	.29**	.10	−.12	−.46**	.55**

Note: $N = 95$. $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

associated with high BDI scores. We did not find evidence for an interaction between these variables, $sr = .01$, $p = .87$, nor did we find a significant Sex × Career Self-congruence interaction, $sr = -.14$, $p = .14$.

Quality of life. Table 2 shows that, as predicted, after controlling for age and sex, low overall self-congruence and high negative elaboration were each independently associated with lower quality of life (QOL). We found no interaction between self-congruence and negative elaboration, $sr = -.02$, $p = .82$. Sex did not interact with self-congruence, $sr = .06$, $p = .57$, but it interacted marginally with negative elaboration, $sr = -.23$, $p < .06$. A follow-up procedure, as recommended by Aiken and West (1991), revealed that for women, negative elaboration was marginally associated with lower QOL, $\beta = -.71$, $p = .06$, but for men, this effect was not significant, $\beta = .10$, $p = .54$.

The next regression model revealed that neither career self-congruence nor negative elaboration was a significant predictor of QOL when entered simultaneously with age and sex. No interaction emerged between these variables, $sr = -.09$, $p = .35$, nor was there a significant Sex × Career Self-congruence effect, $sr = .01$, $p = .90$.

Self-esteem. Table 2 shows that, after controlling for age and sex, overall self-congruence was positively associated with self-esteem, but negative elaboration was not associated with self-esteem. We did, however, find a marginally significant Self-congruence × Negative Elaboration interaction, $sr = -.19$, $p = .06$. The form of the interaction was such that self-congruence was significantly related to higher self-esteem when negative elaboration was low, $\beta = .52$, $p = .001$, but was not significantly related when negative elaboration was high, $\beta = .10$, $p = .46$. A plot of the interaction, shown in Figure 2, revealed that self-esteem was highest for those low in negative elaboration and high in self-congruence.

The interaction of sex and self-congruence on self-esteem was not significant, $sr = -.10$, $p = .32$. However, the Sex × Negative Elaboration interaction was marginally significant, $sr = -.18$, $p = .07$. For men, the association between Negative Elaboration and self-esteem was not significant, $\beta = .11$, $p = .50$. For women, this association was marginally significant, $\beta = -.22$, $p = .10$, such that women with greater negative elaboration had lower self-esteem.

Career self-congruence was not was directly associated with self-esteem. However, the Career Self-congruence × Negative Elaboration interaction was significant, $sr = -.22$, $p < .05$. As in the previous analysis, career self-congruence was significantly associated with higher self-esteem when negative elaboration was low, $\beta = .32$, $p = .03$, but not when negative elaboration was high, $\beta = -.14$, $p = .35$.

TABLE 2 Hierarchical Regressions to Predict Dejection, Quality of Life, and Self-esteem from Self-congruence and Negative Elaboration

Cumulative R^2	sr^2	sr
Dejection		
Model 1	.19**	
Age	.02	−.15
Sex	.06	.25*
Self-congruence	.05	−.22*
Negative elaboration	.04	.21*
Model 2	.20**	
Age	.03	−.17
Sex	.07	.27**
Career self-congruence	.06	−.24**
Negative elaboration	.04	.19*
Quality of Life		
Model 1	.16**	
Age	.01	.08
Sex	.00	−.07
Self-congruence	.11	.33**
Negative elaboration	.04	−.20*
Model 2	.08	
Age	.02	.13
Sex	.01	−.09
Career self-congruence	.03	.16
Negative elaboration	.02	−.15
Self-esteem		
Model 1	.15**	
Age	.04	.19†
Sex	.00	−.03
Self-congruence	.08	.28**
Negative elaboration	.02	−.14
Model 2	.09	
Age	.06	.24*
Sex	.00	−.04
Career self-congruence	.01	.10
Negative elaboration	.01	−.09

Note: $N = 95$. NE: negative elaboration. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; †$p < .06$.

The combination of low negative elaboration and high career self-congruence was associated with the highest self-esteem. The Sex × Career Self-congruence interaction was not significant, $sr = .10$, $p = .34$.

Results from Study 1 were generally consistent with our predictions. Overall self-congruence was correlated with all three outcome measures (dejection, quality of life, and self-esteem), supporting the contention that people feel more positively and less

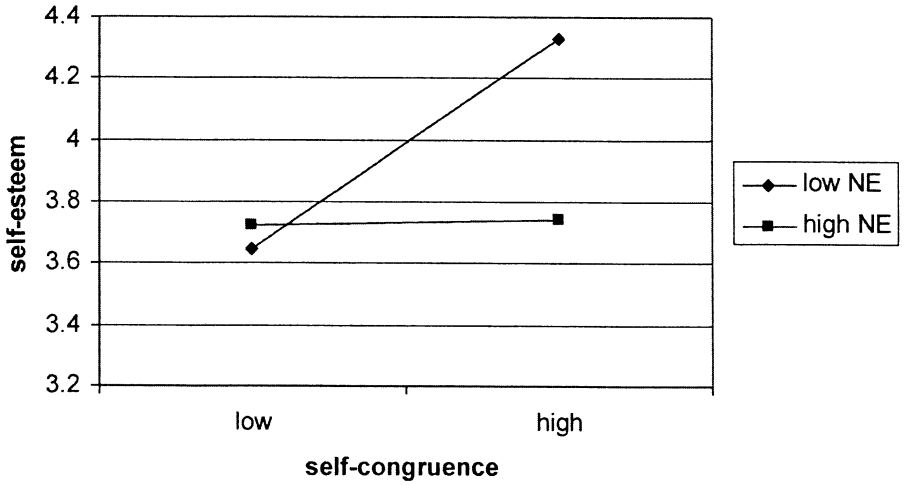

FIGURE 2 Self-congruence as a predictor of self-esteem, by high vs. low negative elaboration. *Note*: NE: Negative elaboration. Estimates adjusted for age and sex.

negatively to the extent that they identify with their set of personal and social roles. Higher career self-congruence (in contrast to overall self-congruence) was related to lower dejection, but was not related to either self-esteem or quality of life.

Negative elaboration was related to higher dejection and lower quality of life, in line with our expectation that restricting the pervasiveness of undesirable features in one's roles and relationships promotes well-being and limits negative feelings (cf. Showers, 1992a, 1992b). Self-esteem presented an interesting special case in which negative elaboration moderated the effects of both overall self-congruence and career self-congruence, in that high negative elaboration nullified both the association between self-esteem and overall self-congruence, and between self-esteem and career self-congruence. It is possible that self-esteem is compromised for those who infuse their personal and social roles with negative qualities.[2]

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated, as expected, that self-congruence was positively related to well-being and negative elaboration was negatively related to well-being. However, Study 1 was correlational, and based on measures collected at the same time. Furthermore, Study 1 was based on a population that was just entering a transition. For these reasons, Study 1 could not show whether self-congruence and negative elaboration predict subsequent well-being, nor could the success with which participants transitioned be determined.

Study 2 provided a more direct test of how the self-structure moderates well-being in transitions. The study involved new analyses of a prospective study of first-time mothers (Reich, Silbert-Mazzarella, Spence, & Siegel, 2005). Time 1 data, which included measures of self-structure, were collected during participants' third trimester. Time 2 data, which included a measure of dejection, were collected 3 to 6 months after the women had delivered their babies. This data set also provided an opportunity to replicate Study 1 findings in a community sample.[3] The sole outcome measure of Study 2 was postpartum dejection, which has been of longstanding interest both to researchers and clinicians (O'Hara & Swain, 1996).

We predicted that women with low self-congruence and women with high negative elaboration at Time 1 (their third trimester) would report greater dejection at Time 2 (3–6 months postpartum), after controlling for dejection at Time 1. In addition, we focused on two self-aspects that have been extensively researched in studies of new mothers: relationship with the father of the child, and role as expectant mother (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Belsky & Isabella, 1985; Deutsch, Ruble, Fleming, Brooks-Gunn, & Stangor, 1988). We predicted that maternal self-congruence, defined as the congruence between these two self-aspects and actual self, would predict lower Time 2 BDI scores (accounting for Time 1 BDI). We also explored the joint effects of self-congruence and negative elaboration in the prediction of postpartum dejection.

Method

Participants

Thirty-three first-time expectant mothers responded to advertisements in two newspapers. Each participant was in her third trimester of pregnancy. Ten women had previously been pregnant, but had not delivered a child, and all but two indicated that the pregnancy was planned. Of these participants, 27 had completed at least some college, and 28 were married. The mean age was 32.41 ($SD = 4.66$).

Procedure

Participants met individually with a female interviewer either in our research facility or in their homes. Twenty-nine of the 33 original participants returned for the second interview session, 3–6 months after delivery. Participants were paid $15 for the first session and $25 for the second session.

Self-description task. At Time 1, women described each of 15 self-aspects by repeatedly selecting from a set of 36 traits in a checklist. Self-aspects included actual self (*the fundamental, "real me"*), a negative self (*me at my worst*), hypothetical selves (*me in the future, me as I ideally would like to be, me as I ought to be, me in the future as a mother*), mother-related roles (*me as an expecting mother, me with the father of my child*), family and relationship identities (*me with my best female friend, me as a member of my family, me with my mother, me with my father*), work and social roles (*me in my work/career role, me in my organizational/community role, me in my religious role*). Also included were four descriptions of real or hypothetical others (*my father, my mother, the father of my child,* and *the typical American mother of today*). These targets were not used in the self-congruence measure.

The trait checklist contained agentic (e.g., *powerful*), social-emotional (e.g., *nurturing*), and globally negative (e.g., *stupid*) terms. Seventeen of the traits on the list (47%) were negative in tone (see the Appendix for the complete list of traits). As in Study 1, there was no limit on the number of traits that could be ascribed to a given self-aspect (or description of another person), or how often a particular trait could be used across self-aspects. At Time 2, the self-description task was identical, except that "*me as an expecting mother*" was replaced with two new targets: "*me with my baby*" and "*me as a mother.*"

Self-structure and outcome measures. Each woman's Time 1 and Time 2 self-descriptive data were separately modeled using HICLAS. Self-congruence was indexed by counting the number of self-aspects that were located either in the same

class as, or in a subordinate class to, actual self. Time 1 self-congruence scores ranged from 0 to 14, $M = 5.21$, $SD = 4.03$, and Time 2 self-congruence scores ranged from 0 to 13, $M = 6.34$, $SD = 3.44$. Next, we constructed a binary maternal self-congruence measure (similar to the career self-congruence measure in Study 1). A woman received a score of 1 if her actual self contained either "me as an expecting mother" or "me with the father of my child"; otherwise her score was 0. As in Study 1, negative elaboration was indexed by counting the number of negative trait classes (not the negative traits themselves); a trait class was labeled "negative" if the majority of terms contained in it were negative. At Time 1, women's HICLAS outputs contained from 0 to 2 negative classes, $M = 0.72$ ($SD = 0.75$), and at Time 2, there were 0 to 3 negative classes, $M = 1.00$ ($SD = 0.93$). Women also completed the BDI at Time 1 ($M = 9.62$, $SD = 3.05$) and at Time 2 ($M = 7.17$, $SD = 3.68$).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Self-congruence did not change significantly over time, $t(28) = -1.48$, $p = .15$, and negative elaboration remained stable as well, $t(28) = 1.68$, $p = .10$. BDI scores were lower at Time 2, $t(28) = 3.77$, $p < .01$. Age was negatively correlated with BDI at both times, $rs = -.52$ and $-.40$, $ps < .05$, but was not correlated with negative elaboration or self-congruence at either time, $ps > .19$. Age and Time 1 BDI were therefore treated as control variables. Correlations among major variables are shown in Table 3.

Predicting Dejection at Time 2

After controlling for age and Time 1 BDI, neither overall self-congruence nor negative elaboration, nor their interaction term, was predictive of Time 2 BDI ($ps > .10$). After controlling for age and Time 1 BDI, neither maternal self-congruence nor negative elaboration independently predicted Time 2 BDI ($ps > .15$). However, the Maternal Self-congruence × Negative Elaboration interaction term was significant, $sr = -.33$, $p < .05$. The form of the interaction was such that for low-negative-elaboration women, maternal self-congruence was unrelated to Time 2 BDI, $\beta = .08$, $p = .75$, but for high-negative-elaboration women, high maternal self-congruence predicted lower Time 2 BDI as expected, $\beta = -.66$, $p < .02$. A plot of the interaction (see Figure 3) revealed that new mothers who were high in negative elaboration and low in maternal self-congruence in their third trimester reported the most dejection after giving birth.[4,5]

General Discussion

Life transitions are often challenging. Will one be able to succeed in the new role, and feel socially accepted within it? Will one's strengths promote success, or will one's weaknesses and deficiencies undermine it? Will one's aptitudes and interests fit with the new role, or will the new role neglect or even oppose these personal qualities? These questions suggest that the structure of the self plays a vital role in negotiating life transitions. The present research indicates that this is so. It showed that two defining elements of self-structure, self-congruence and negative elaboration, separately affected psychological well-being related to transitions. Moreover, by measuring self-congruence and negative elaboration simultaneously, this research afforded explorations into the interactions between them. It is the first

TABLE 3 Zero-order Correlations Among Major Variables in Study 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. T1 Self-congruence	–					
2. T2 Self-congruence	.39*	–				
3. T1 Maternal self-congruence	.75**	.22	–			
4. T1 Negative elaboration	.47*	.26	.23	–		
5. T1 Negative elaboration	.32	.33	.30	.46	–	
6. T1 Dejection	.11	−.37	.35	.08	.05	–
7. T2 Dejection	−.17	−.22	−.09	−.12	−.27	.47**

Note: $N = 29$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

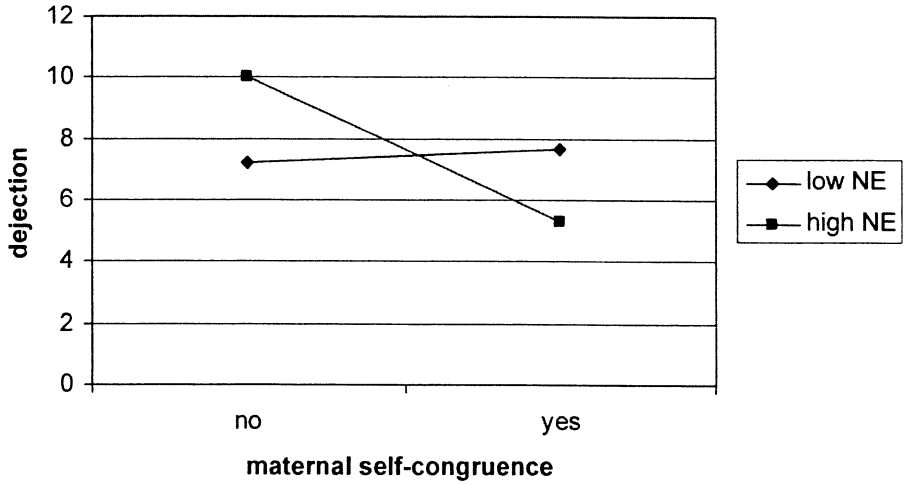

FIGURE 3 Time 1 maternal self-congruence as a predictor of Time 2 dejection, by high vs. low Time 1 negative elaboration. *Note*: NE: Negative elaboration. Maternal self-congruence: whether or not actual self contains "me as an expecting mother" and/or "me with father of my child," from participants' HICLAS outputs. Estimates adjusted for age and Time 1 dejection.

research to do so, and results indicate that congruence and negative elaboration jointly affect well-being.

Study 1, a correlational investigation of college students, provided preliminary answers to these questions. Students' overall self-congruence (the accord between their actual selves and their social roles) was positively related to their quality of life and self-esteem, and was negatively related to their feelings of dejection. This pattern supported and extended evidence that self-congruence is a coping asset (Kasser & Sheldon, 2004). Separate analyses examined the effects of career self-congruence (i.e., accord between actual self and career objectives), which addresses the major life transition these young adults anticipated by virtue of their student role. Consistent with predictions, higher career self-congruence was related to lower dejection.

Unlike overall self-congruence, career self-congruence was not related to self-esteem or to quality of life. Perhaps for first- and second-year college students (who predominated our sample), a career goal is only partially complete at best; even if its pursuit is entirely self-congruent, the goal has yet to be realized. However, as graduation approaches, self-congruence (or lack thereof) may become increasingly associated with well-being, and perhaps contributes to the familiar and often uncomfortable "senioritis" that many near-graduates experience.

Career self-congruence may also be less predictive of well-being than overall congruence because a career goal is not the only identity in which college students are invested. Some students condition their identities on athletics or social ties or, more broadly, on becoming a more independent person (Cantor, Kemmelmeier, Basten, & Prentice, 2002). In this vein Steele (1992) proposed that minority students' self-esteem is affected by academic performance only to the extent that they identify with academics. Future research might examine individual differences in career orientation, which may moderate the association of career self-congruence with quality of life and self-esteem.

Negative elaboration was related to higher dejection and lower quality of life among college students. This pattern is in line with our expectation that populating different facets of the self-concept with undesirable features undermines overall quality of life. Further, it supports related research showing that negative elaboration is a coping liability (Gara et al., 1993; Woolfolk et al., 1995). Of special interest was evidence that negative elaboration moderated the benefits of self-congruence. Specifically, the beneficial effect of self-congruence on esteem was limited to those self-congruent students who were low in negative elaboration. Self-congruent students high in negative elaboration reported self-esteem that was the same as that reported by students with low self-congruence. This finding suggests that self-esteem is compromised even for those who identify with their personal and social roles, by infusing these roles with negative qualities. One avenue for future research would be to investigate whether negative elaboration inhibits goal implementation, which has been shown to influence progress toward goals (Gollwitzer, 1999; Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002).

Study 2 built on these results in a prospective investigation of the transition into motherhood, wherein self-structure and coping information were gathered from these new mothers just before and soon after they gave birth. The principal finding of this study was an interaction of maternal self-congruence and negative elaboration on feelings of postpartum dejection. The data showed greatest dejection among those women who felt little congruence with their new mother role, and who also were high in negative elaboration. These are women who do not identify strongly with the new role they have assumed, and who also see multiple aspects of themselves in a negative light. High rates of dejection would fit with this unhappy combination of role alienation and negative self-appraisal. However, the least dejected were women who reported high negative elaboration, but for whom motherhood was highly self-congruent. For these women, becoming a mother may have provided an important and positive role that counteracted other domains laced with negative self-appraisals. Being a mother, then, may have represented a "new start" that felt both authentic yet free of demoralizing negative attributes.[6] This illustrates a more positive side to life transitions—as opportunities for growth and renewal.

The benefits of self-congruence appear straightforward; assuming a new role that matches one's essential values and inclinations should be more psychologically adaptive than assuming a new role that neglects or opposes one's core attributes.

However, the effects of negative elaboration on well-being are not as clear cut. We discuss several ways in which this construct might influence well-being, especially during transitions.

Negative elaboration and self-evaluation. One possibility is that high-negative elaboration individuals are more prone to rumination (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993). Dwelling and elaborating on one's misfortunes or personal failings may not only have the effect of prolonging negative moods, but also, somewhat ironically, may sustain the elaborated negative self-schema through extended focus of attention on one's undesirable qualities. In Baumeister's (1994) "crystallization of discontent" formulation, as one begins to see a patterned relationship among a series of apparently disconnected negative life events, this emergent pattern eventually becomes integrated into one's personality. The unintended consequence of generating and recounting life narratives chronicling these aversive events may be the elaboration of one's negative self-schema. Indeed these "contamination" narratives have been empirically associated with reduced well-being (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Two findings in Study 1 point to the possibility that women are more susceptible than men to the impact of negative elaboration on well-being, and suggest that this self-structural variable might contribute to the well-documented gender difference in depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001).

A related possibility is that high-negative-elaboration individuals are more likely to internalize blame for unpleasant events than they are to accept credit for positive events. If some negative attribute is present in several contexts or roles in a high-negative-elaboration person's life, then it may be difficult for this person to view a personal success as anything but a fleeting moment of good luck (Dweck, 1991; Woolfolk et al., 1999). Moreover, Swann's extensive work on people with low self-esteem (1987, 1990) suggests that the self-verifying strategies of high-negative elaboration individuals, whereby friends, relatives, and intimates effectively hold them responsible for negative life events, may result in further consensual validation of their "truly" negative selves. Although they may wish for more positive evaluations, people with negative self-evaluations find criticism, blame, or scorn more convincing and more easily assimilated into their self-images (Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

Negative elaboration and evaluative integration. Showers' (1992a, 1992b) theory and research provides another way to understand the liabilities of negative elaboration. Showers (1992b) showed that compartmentalized individuals, who demonstrated little overlap between their positive and negative traits across self-aspects, tended to be higher in self-esteem than evaluatively integrated individuals, whose self-aspects were more likely to be described simultaneously in positive and negative terms. Our low-negative-elaboration participants might have been "compartmentalizers," according to this usage of the term: for them, negative self-knowledge is restricted in range and cognitively segregated from positive self-knowledge. By the same logic our high-negative-elaboration participants would correspond to the evaluatively integrated individuals in Showers' research. If so, we would expect the result shown in Figure 2, that higher self-congruence was associated with higher self-esteem for low- (but not high-) negative-elaboration participants. The positive feelings produced by high self-congruence would be muted in evaluatively integrated individuals, for whom positive events frequently cue negative thoughts.

Caveats and Future Directions

This research was guided by the hypothesis that self-structure would affect the success of life transitions. Although results are generally consistent with this hypothesis, there are some important limits that constrain interpretation. First, Study 1 revealed only contemporaneous correlations. Study 2 was prospective, and does therefore provide some basis for causal inference; however it involved only two time points and had limited statistical power due to its sample size. More important, Study 2 did not have a comparison group of non-first-time mothers, hence it is not possible to judge whether the predictions we found were unique to this life transition (or simply a function of time, whether or not a life transition was involved). In addition to addressing these concerns, future studies might include coping moderators such as social support and self-efficacy, which would determine whether these variables condition the effect of self-structure on transitions.

The main advantage of HICLAS is that it allowed us to explicitly link classes of self-aspects with classes of traits. By doing so, HICLAS simultaneously measured self-congruence and negative elaboration in a manner consistent with theoretical definitions of these constructs, and allowed for an efficient test of the independent and joint influences of these variables on well-being. Future studies would benefit from examining the relationship between HICLAS-derived measures and other self-structural measures such as evaluative integration (Showers, 1992a) and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). In particular, the conceptual resemblance between negative elaboration and self-complexity (Linville, 1987) suggests future research comparing our HICLAS-derived measure to the *H* statistic, which is more commonly used to measure self-complexity (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002) and negative self-complexity (Rafaeli-Mor, Gotlib, & Revelle, 1999). HICLAS-based measures of self-structure might also lead to insights into when a highly differentiated self leads to positive (e.g., Dixon & Baumeister, 1991) or negative (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993) outcomes.

Conclusion

The age-old adage "to thine own self be true" gained empirical support in this research. As predicted, well-being was highest for those whose self-structures were congruent. This research also introduced an important caveat: A discrepancy between actual self and social roles is an even greater burden when the self is negatively appraised.

Notes

1. In practice, we discovered in both studies that negative trait classes were very easy to identify in the HICLAS outputs. Trait classes that contained any negative traits at all usually contained far fewer than 50% positive traits—more often than not, these classes had no positive traits at all. This was true as well for Gara et al. (1993) and Woolfolk et al. (1995).
2. Conceivably, the results reported for negative elaboration may not have been due only to the effects of negative trait clusters. Perhaps a corresponding index of positive elaboration—the number of positive trait classes in a participant's HICLAS output—would yield similar results. If so, the conclusion would apply to elaboration in general, not only to negative elaboration. To test this proposition, we indexed positive

elaboration by counting the number of positive trait classes in the HICLAS outputs, and used this variable in place of negative elaboration in each of the above-mentioned regression analyses. The correlation between positive and negative elaboration was −.62. Marginal main effects were found for positive elaboration as a predictor of dejection, $sr = -.16$, $p = .10$, and of QOL, $sr = .17$, $p = .08$, but not of self-esteem, $sr = .11$, $p = .26$. Of the tests for joint effects, only the Sex × Positive Elaboration term was significant, $sr = .20$, $p < .05$. The form of the interaction was such that for women, the effect of positive elaboration was marginally significant, $\beta = .23$, $p = .09$, but for men, this relationship was not significant, $\beta = -.16$, $p = .31$. Thus, although positive elaboration demonstrated some predictive power, negative elaboration was more strongly associated with well-being outcome measures.

3. The original study was concerned with the agentic or social-emotional content of the self-descriptions, specifically the degree to which content moderated the relationship between mother-role stress and postpartum dejection, and social support and postpartum dejection. The present study examines two much different features of the HICLAS outputs.
4. Given the potential instability of estimates of interaction effect size in our small sample, we computed influence statistics (sdBeta, SPSS 7.0). One participant was relatively influential in the estimation of the interaction term; her sdBeta of .84 stood out from the others, which ranged from −.37 to .31. Removing this participant from the analysis did not substantially affect the Maternal Self-Congruence × Negative Elaboration interaction term, $sr = -.38$, $p = .02$.
5. As in Study 1, we tested the predictive power of positive self-complexity by replacing negative elaboration with the number of positive trait classes in each woman's HICLAS output in the regression analyses (the correlation between positive and negative SC was −.67). Positive elaboration was not significant either as a main effect, or in interaction with either self-congruence variable, $ps > .15$. Again, negative elaboration proved superior to its positive counterpart as a predictor of dejection.
6. Our examination of Time 2 HICLAS outputs revealed that the self-aspects "me with my baby" and "me as a mother" were only linked to a negative trait class in two cases.

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APPENDIX

Trait Terms Used in Study 1 and Study 2

Study 1 traits	Study 2 traits
able to cope	accomplished
accomplished	achievement
achievement	anger
active	argumentative
afraid to fail	bored
altruistic	caring
anxious	cold
argumentative	controlling
careless	courage
caring	determined
cold	disappointment
compassionate	distant
competent	focused
competitive	in control
conscientious	jealous
conventional	joy
curious	knowledgeable
disagreeable	love
disorganized	loyal
distant	nurturing
easygoing	overwhelmed
emotionally stable	passionate
extraverted	passive
feel like quitting	powerful
hardheaded	procrastinating
imaginative	resilient
introverted	sadness
open-minded	strength
outgoing	stupid
playful	tenderness
powerful	trust
relaxed	unhappiness
self-conscious	warm
self-disciplined	weak
serious	withdrawn
set in my ways	worry
shy	
strong	
timid	
traditional	
trusting	
warm	
weak	
worried	