



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Research in Personality

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

Can Rosenberg's (1965) Stability of Self Scale capture within-person self-esteem variability? Meta-analytic validity and test–retest reliability[☆]

Gregory D. Webster^{a,*}, C. Veronica Smith^b, Amy B. Brunell^c, E. Layne Paddock^d, John B. Nezlek^{e,f}

^a University of Florida, USA

^b University of Mississippi, USA

^c The Ohio State University at Mansfield, USA

^d ETH Zürich, Switzerland

^e College of William & Mary in Virginia, USA

^f University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poznań, Poland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2015

Revised 30 March 2016

Accepted 4 June 2016

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Stability

Instability

Self

Self-esteem

Meta-analysis

Measurement

Within-person variability

Stability of self

Daily diary

Experience sampling

Validity

Reliability

ABSTRACT

Can Rosenberg's (1965) Stability of Self Scale (RSSS) capture within-person variability in state self-esteem over time? Whereas prior research found small correlations between the RSSS and temporal self-esteem instability (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989, 1992), we found moderate-to-large correlations. Our meta-analysis of these correlations showed convergent validity, and that studies with time-stamped state self-esteem assessments had higher correlations than those lacking them (Study 1). The RSSS also showed high test–retest reliability (Studies 2 & 3) and high convergent validity with the Labile Self-Esteem Scale (Dykman, 1998; Study 3). Exploratory analyses showed that the RSSS reflects short-term (daily, weekly) fluctuations in state self-esteem, but not long-term (annual) ones. We discuss the RSSS' efficacy as an efficient state self-esteem instability measure.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 50 years Rosenberg's (1965) book, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, has become an indispensable resource for self-esteem research, garnering over 26,000 citations according to Google Scholar (June 2016). But many—perhaps most—of these citations are not drawing on the book's content so much as its influential scale, the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Although other measures of self-esteem exist (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Robins, Hendlin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), the RSES

remains the most popular. This fact makes it all the more surprising that a related scale printed next to it—the 5-item Rosenberg Stability of Self Scale (RSSS; Table 1)—has received comparatively little attention. Whereas the RSES measures trait self-esteem level, the RSSS measures trait self-esteem (in)stability.

Although self-esteem is often considered a stable trait, it can change over the lifespan (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003) and can fluctuate on daily or momentary timescales (Kernis, 2005; Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), often in response to social events (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek, Feist, Wilson, & Plesko, 2001; Nezlek & Gable, 2001; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001). Indeed, researchers often distinguish between *baseline* or long-term variation (over years or decades) in *trait* self-esteem vs. *barometric* or short-term fluctuations (over hours, days, or weeks) in *state* self-esteem (James, 1890/1950; Rosenberg, 1986; see also Kernis, 2005; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

[☆] Different analyses of some of the data in Study 3 appear in Jonason and Webster (2010) Study 3. Whereas the present Study 3 examined associations among three measures of self-esteem instability, Jonason and Webster's (2010) Study 3 examined associations between the Dark Triad traits and measures of trait aggression, self-esteem level, and self-esteem instability. The present Study 3 reproduces none of the same results, aside from reliability coefficients (α s).

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Florida, P.O. Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250, USA.

E-mail address: gdwebs@ufl.edu (G.D. Webster).

Table 1
Items for two trait self-esteem instability measures.

	Rosenberg's (1965) Stability of Self Scale (RSSS)
	Original items
	1. Does your opinion of yourself tend to change a good deal, or does it always continue to remain the same? ^{a,b}
	2. Do you ever find that on one day you have one opinion of yourself and on another day you have a different opinion? ^{a,c}
	3. I have noticed that my ideas about myself seem to change very quickly ^{a,d}
	4. Some days I have a very good opinion of myself; other days I have a very poor opinion of myself ^{a,d}
	5. I feel that nothing, or almost nothing, can change the opinion I currently hold of myself ^d
	Revised items ^e
	1. My opinion of myself tends to change a good deal instead of always remaining the same ^a
	2. I find that on one day I have one opinion of myself and on another day I have a different opinion ^a
	3. I change from a very good opinion from myself to a very poor opinion of myself ^{a,f}
	4. I have noticed that my ideas about myself seem to change very quickly ^{a,f}
	5. I feel that nothing can change the opinion I currently hold of myself
	Dykman's (1998) Labile Self-Esteem Scale (LSES)
	1. I notice that how good I feel about myself changes from day to day (or hour to hour)
	2. How I feel about myself stays pretty much the same from day to day ^a
	3. My self-esteem shifts rapidly from feeling good about myself on one day to feeling bad about myself the next day
	4. I'm often feeling good about myself one minute, and down on myself the next minute
	5. Compared to most people, my self-esteem changes rapidly

^a Reverse-scored item.

^b Response scale: A. Changes a great deal, B. Changes somewhat, C. Changes very little, D. Does not change at all.

^c Response scale: A. Yes, this happens often, B. Yes, this happens sometimes, C. Yes, this happens rarely, D. No, this never happens.

^d Response scale: A. Agree, B. Disagree.

^e Items from Marsh (1993, p. 267); in Studies 1–3, we scored it to reflect self-esteem instability; used agree–disagree Likert scales; 5-, 7-, or 9-point scales varying across studies (see Table 2).

^f Items 3 and 4 in revised version reflect Items 4 and 3, respectively, in original version.

The main goals of present research were (a) to assess the validity and reliability of the RSSS' scores and (b) to examine its efficacy as a stable trait measure of state or barometric self-esteem instability over short time periods. Specifically, we focus on convergent validity between the RSSS and within-person variability in state self-esteem over time. To this end, we present a meta-analysis and two additional studies that assess the links among multiple measures of self-esteem instability. We revisit the abovementioned trait–state (i.e., baseline–barometric) distinction and its implications for the RSSS with some exploratory analyses to close our investigation. We begin, however, by describing two complementary measures of state self-esteem instability that have dominated the last 50 years of research.

1.1. Stability of Self Scale

The five-item RSSS (Table 1) is a unidimensional (Franzoi & Reddish, 1980) self-report measure that purports to provide a trait-based assessment of fluctuations in people's day-to-day self-esteem. Although it contains one reverse-scored item (Item 5), sometimes the entire RSSS is reverse-scored to reflect self-esteem instability (vs. stability) to be in a direction consistent with other measures, where higher numbers reflect greater instability. Throughout the present research we score the RSSS in terms of instability. The RSSS also has two versions: original and revised (Table 1). The original version includes a mix of items (questions and statements) and response scales (Rosenberg, 1965). The revised version includes items that are similar but simpler, and features agree–disagree Likert response scales (Marsh, 1993). In our meta-analysis below (Study 1), studies conducted or published after 1993 featured revised RSSS items and response scales.

For RSSS scores to be valid requires accurate insight from respondents. Can the average person use the RSSS to accurately report the extent to which their state self-esteem varies over time? Perhaps because of this question, the RSSS' use declined with the

advent of experience sampling studies, which often use the *SD* of repeated measures of state self-esteem over time as a measure of temporal self-esteem instability. Together, both instability measures can allow us to address whether the average person can accurately report variability in their state self-esteem. To help answer this question, we compare the RSSS to a more objective measure of actual temporal self-esteem instability.

1.2. Temporal self-esteem instability

Kernis and colleagues (Kernis 1993, 2005; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989, 1992) pioneered a new measure of self-esteem instability by having participants respond to multiple assessments of state self-esteem over time using interval-contingent experience-sampling methods. Most frequently, Kernis and colleagues have adapted the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) for daily (or semi-daily) assessment of state self-esteem. After calculating a 10-item mean for each session for each person, the *SD* of these state self-esteem means is taken across all sessions for each person. This temporal *SD* reflects within-person variability in state self-esteem over time, and is considered a trait-level individual difference.

Several researchers have adopted Kernis and colleagues' approach to measuring state self-esteem (e.g., Nezlek & Gable, 2001; Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and its instability with an *SD* over time (e.g., Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007; Gable & Nezlek, 1998; Greenier et al., 1999; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Seary, Blascovich, & Vick, 2004; Webster, Kirkpatrick, Nezlek, Smith, & Paddock, 2007; Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Although other researchers have shown other—and arguably better—ways to measure within-person variability (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; Geiser et al., 2015; Nezlek, 2012), these often correlate highly with the traditional *SD*-based temporal approach and produce similar results (Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, Holden, & Southard, 2014).

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