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**Actual Change, Perceived Change, and Change Goals in Global and Domain-Specific
Self-Esteem**

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Abstract

This study examined actual change, perceived change, and change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem and their adaptiveness for well-being. Data were drawn from five waves of the 8-year SELF study comprising 399 to 634 German adults per wave ($M_{\text{age}} = 47.0$, $SD = 12.4$ at intake). Participants generally expressed a desire to enhance their self-esteem, with substantial individual variability. Lower self-esteem predicted stronger change goals, and perceived changes were closely aligned with actual changes, particularly in performance self-esteem. Actual increases in self-esteem predicted higher life satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms, whereas change goals in some self-esteem domains were associated with lower well-being. Perceived increases were independently associated with adaptive outcomes, highlighting the importance of subjective self-evaluations alongside actual change.

Keywords: self-esteem, domain-specificity, perceived change, volitional change goals, longitudinal, well-being

1. Introduction: Actual Change, Perceived Change, and Change Goals in Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem¹

Self-esteem refers to the overall positivity of individuals' self-evaluations (Rosenberg, 1965) and varies substantially across individuals. How people perceive and evaluate themselves has been described as one of the most central constructs of conscious experience (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). It constitutes a key component of human functioning (Kernis, 2006; MacDonald & Leary, 2012), such that individual differences in self-esteem have far-reaching implications for mental health and psychological well-being (Orth & Robins, 2013; Stinson et al., 2008) as well as for social functioning and interpersonal relationships (de Moor et al., 2021; Leary et al., 1995). Across diverse life domains, individuals with higher levels of self-esteem generally experience more adaptive outcomes than those with lower self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2022).

1.1 Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem Change

A long-standing tradition in self-esteem research conceptualizes self-esteem as a multifaceted construct. Multidimensional models, such as the influential framework proposed by Shavelson et al. (1976), distinguish between global self-esteem and domain-specific self-esteem. Global self-esteem refers to individuals' overall sense of self-worth and reflects their general evaluative stance toward the self. As Brown and Marshall (2006) noted, it captures "the way people generally feel about themselves" (p. 4), that is, "a feeling of affection for oneself that is not derived from rational, judgmental processes" (p. 4). In addition to this global evaluation, individuals form self-evaluations in specific life domains. Commonly distinguished domains include academic self-esteem (evaluations of one's abilities and

¹ Author Contributions: (masked for review) Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project Administration

performance in educational or occupational contexts), social self-esteem (evaluations of one's social skills and perceived acceptance by others), and physical self-esteem (evaluations of one's physical appearance or physical abilities). These broad domains can be further differentiated into more narrowly defined facets; for example, physical self-esteem is often subdivided into physical appearance self-esteem and physical ability self-esteem (e.g., Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Shavelson et al., 1976). Although self-esteem domains are typically positively correlated (e.g., Rentzsch et al., 2022), levels of self-esteem may vary considerably across domains within the same individual. For instance, a person may hold a highly positive self-evaluation in the performance domain (e.g., "I feel competent at my job") but a negative self-evaluation in the social domain (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable in social interactions"). Consequently, examining domain-specific self-esteem in addition to global self-esteem provides a more differentiated and nuanced understanding of individuals' self-evaluations (see also Marsh et al., 2006; Rentzsch et al., 2022; Roepke et al., 2011).

Building on this multifaceted conceptualization of self-esteem, an important line of research has examined the extent to which both global and domain-specific self-esteem are stable or change over time. Research on stability in adulthood has focused predominantly on global self-esteem, whereas studies examining the stability of domain-specific self-esteem have primarily been conducted in children, adolescents, and young adults (see Orth et al., 2021). Findings from prior research indicate that global self-esteem in adulthood is relatively stable in terms of rank-order stability—that is, the consistency of individuals' relative standing over time (e.g., Orth et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2014)—and shows small to moderate mean-level increases until approximately age 60, followed by small decreases after age 90, reflecting modest developmental trends across the adult life span (e.g., Orth et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2013). Research has demonstrated that domain-specific self-esteem in adulthood exhibits a degree of stability that is comparable to that of global self-esteem, with respect to both rank-order stability and mean-level change (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018,

2022). Importantly, however, despite this overall temporal stability, individual differences in self-esteem remain subject to change (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Reitz, 2022). Indeed, previous studies have consistently documented substantial interindividual variability in longitudinal self-esteem trajectories, with some individuals showing increases, others decreases, and still others little to no change in either global or domain-specific self-esteem over time (Donnellan et al., 2007; Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018, 2022).

1.2 Actual Trait Change, Perceived Trait Change, and Trait Change Goals

Although studies on the long-term stability of self-esteem have provided critical insights into actual developmental change, research has increasingly emphasized that trait development cannot be fully understood by examining actual trait change alone, but instead involves multiple conceptually distinct layers, including subjective perceptions of change and intentional efforts to change (e.g., Haehner et al., 2024; Hudson et al., 2019; Quintus et al., 2017; Thielmann & de Vries, 2021). In this framework, *actual change* refers to intraindividual changes in trait levels over time as assessed in longitudinal data, whereas *perceived change* captures individuals' subjective retrospective appraisals of how their traits have developed over the course of time, regardless of actual measured change (e.g., Hudson et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2014). In addition, *change goals* reflect individuals' desires to modify their traits in a particular direction which may lead to volitional change when the desires would be translated into consistent behaviors that would facilitate actual change (Hudson & Roberts, 2014; Quintus et al., 2017; Thielmann & de Vries, 2021).

Importantly, a growing body of research, especially on the Big Five personality traits, has demonstrated that these components of change are differentially related to psychological functioning (e.g., Hudson et al., 2019; Hudson & Fraley, 2016; Krämer et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies have shown that greater actual personality change predicts improved mental health and well-being outcomes (Hudson et al., 2019; Krämer et al., 2025; Magee et al., 2013). At the same time, perceived change has been found to be only moderately aligned

with actual change, yet both independently predict improved psychological well-being (Hudson et al., 2019). Furthermore, most individuals report a desire to change their personality traits, typically toward more socially desirable characteristics (Thielmann & de Vries, 2021), and greater change goals prospectively predict stronger trait development and increases in well-being when achieved (Hudson & Fraley, 2016; Krämer et al., 2025; Quintus et al., 2017). Although volitional efforts can lead to actual personality change (Hudson & Fraley, 2015, 2016; Hudson et al., 2020), unfulfilled change goals may be associated with lower well-being, potentially reflecting discrepancies between desired and actual selves (Hudson et al., 2019; Stieger et al., 2020).

Importantly, research on personality change has suggested that the adaptiveness of actual, perceived, and desired change processes is not uniform across traits but may follow a certain pattern. Changes in neuroticism appear to be particularly consequential, with decreases predicting lower levels of depression and higher well-being. Similarly, increases in extraversion have been shown to be associated with higher positive affect and life satisfaction, whereas increases in conscientiousness were linked to improved functioning and health-related outcomes (e.g., Hudson et al., 2019; Hudson & Fraley, 2016; Thielmann & DeVries, 2021). Notably, these patterns are mirrored across actual, perceived, and goal-directed change processes, suggesting that individuals are not only sensitive to changes in psychologically consequential traits but also preferentially strive to change in socially desirable directions (Baranski et al., 2021; Stieger et al., 2020).

In contrast to the growing body of research on perceived change and volitional change goals in personality traits, empirical work on these processes in self-esteem remains remarkably limited. To date, only a few studies have examined perceived change in self-esteem directly. For example, Chung et al. (2014) have shown that individuals' perceptions of change in their global self-esteem were broadly aligned with actual mean-level increases over time, suggesting a certain degree of accuracy. Beyond this study, however, systematic

research on perceived self-esteem change is largely absent. Even more striking, research on self-esteem change goals and volitional self-esteem change is virtually nonexistent. Although related constructs such as self-enhancement and self-improvement motives have been widely studied (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012), these approaches rarely assess explicit desires to change one's level of self-esteem or the extent to which such intentions are translated into behavior.

By contrast, there is substantial evidence that actual change in global self-esteem is meaningfully linked to important life outcomes. Multiple meta-analyses and longitudinal research have robustly established that self-esteem is linked to mental health and well-being (e.g., Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Muris & Otgaar, 2023; Zell & Johannson, 2025), with particular support for a vulnerability model that specifies that lower self-esteem is a particular risk factor for depression and lower life satisfaction (Aebi & Orth, 2025; Orth & Robins, 2013; Orth et al., 2012). However, much less is known about the adaptiveness of perceived self-esteem change and self-esteem change goals, and research on the adaptiveness of domain-specific self-esteem change remains scarce.

Taken together, these findings highlight a striking imbalance in the literature: While the developmental trajectories and consequences of global self-esteem have been extensively studied, considerably less is known about how individuals perceive and desire such changes in their self-esteem, particularly across different domains.

1.3 The Present Study

In the present study, I investigated actual change, perceived change, and change goals in both global and domain-specific self-esteem. First, I examined these three forms of change descriptively to characterize their distributions and magnitudes. Next, I analyzed their interrelationships to clarify how actual change, subjective perceptions of change, and desires to bring about change are connected. In addition, I examined the adaptiveness of actual change, perceived change, and change goals in self-esteem by exploring their relationships with life satisfaction and depressive symptoms.

By addressing these questions, I aimed to fill a critical gap in the self-esteem literature. On the basis of prior theoretical and empirical work, a set of research questions and hypotheses was derived. The hypotheses were tested with data from the *Masked for Review*, in which participants were assessed at 2-year intervals across 5 measurement occasions in order to provide self-reports on their actual self-esteem, yielding a total observation period of 8 years. All directional hypotheses were preregistered before data from Time 5 were collected (https://osf.io/qkjwp/overview?view_only=4760de9cdd704df08497a2f5b207e0e6).

1.3.1 Do People Exhibit, Perceive, or Want Change in Their Multidimensional Self-Esteem?

First, I addressed the descriptive nature of actual change, perceived change, and change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem. This analysis provides foundational insight into whether—and to what extent—individuals show actual change, subjectively perceive change, and intentionally strive for change in their self-esteem over time.

1.3.2 Do People Have Accurate Perceptions of Their Self-Esteem Change?

Next, I investigated the accuracy of individuals' perceptions of their self-esteem change by examining the correspondence between actual and perceived change. On the basis of previous findings demonstrating moderate accuracy in perceived change in global self-esteem (Chung et al., 2014), I hypothesized a positive and significant association between actual change and perceived change in both global and domain-specific self-esteem (Hypothesis 1; preregistered).

1.3.3 Who Wants to Change?

Previous research on Big Five and HEXACO personality traits has shown that the intention to change is often negatively associated with individuals' trait levels, a pattern that may reflect a desire to acquire socially desirable characteristics that one currently lacks (Quintus et al., 2017; Stieger et al., 2020; Thielmann & de Vries, 2021). Drawing on these findings, I hypothesized a similar pattern for self-esteem: Specifically, I expected a negative

and significant association between the level of global self-esteem (and domain-specific self-esteem) at Time 5 and subsequent change goals in the same self-esteem domain over the following 2 years (Hypothesis 3a; preregistered).²

In addition, an exploratory investigation of the association between actual self-esteem change and goals to change self-esteem was conducted (not preregistered).

1.3.4 Is it Adaptive to Exhibit, Perceive, or Want Self-Esteem Change?

The adaptiveness of self-esteem change can be understood in light of research on personality development and the motivational underpinnings of self-enhancement. Previous studies have indicated that perceived (Hudson et al., 2019) and actual changes in personality traits (Haehner et al., 2024; Hudson et al., 2019; Krämer et al., 2025; Olaru et al., 2023) and in global self-esteem (Orth et al., 2012) are generally linked to beneficial outcomes for psychological well-being. Similarly, research on self-enhancement has suggested that individuals are intrinsically motivated to increase and maintain favorable self-evaluations and that positive development of the self is adaptive and desirable (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Building on these insights, I examined the associations between actual change, perceived change, and change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem and key indicators of well-being: life satisfaction and depressive symptoms.

I expected that actual change in global self-esteem would be positively associated with life satisfaction at Time 5 (Hypothesis 2a, preregistered) and extended the investigation to domain-specific self-esteem change on an exploratory level (not preregistered).

I expected that perceived change in global self-esteem would be positively associated with life satisfaction at Time 5 (Hypothesis 2b, preregistered) and extended the investigation to domain-specific self-esteem change on an exploratory level (not preregistered).

² The hypothesis was preregistered as Hypothesis 3a.

In addition, I also conducted an exploratory investigation of the association between self-esteem change goals and life satisfaction (not preregistered).

I expected that actual change in global self-esteem would be negatively associated with changes in depressive symptoms over the study period (Hypothesis 2c, preregistered) and extended the investigation to domain-specific self-esteem change on an exploratory level (not preregistered).

I expected that perceived change in global self-esteem would be negatively associated with changes in depressive symptoms (Hypothesis 2d, preregistered) and extended the investigation to domain-specific self-esteem change on an exploratory level (not preregistered).

In addition, an exploratory analysis of the association between change in depression and goals to change self-esteem was conducted (not preregistered).

2. Method

2.1 Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the ethics committee at *Masked for Review* and the ethics committee at *Masked for Review*.

2.2 Preregistration and Open Science Material

The present study's method, analyses, and hypotheses were preregistered before the collection of Time 5 data (see

https://osf.io/qkjwp/overview?view_only=4760de9cdd704df08497a2f5b207e0e6).³

Deviations from the preregistration are reported in additional online material (Table S4, https://osf.io/druj9/overview?view_only=b51f4d15af3e46d8ac957d1785c8bdf9) following recommendations by Willroth and Atherton (2024).

³ The preregistration was conducted as part of a broader research project that included additional hypotheses on envy, addressing a distinct research focus within the same longitudinal data set.

The data used in the present study were drawn from the SELF study (*Masked for Review*), whose data and codebook are openly accessible at *Masked for Review*. A detailed overview of all measures at each time point, previous preregistrations, and all projects in which I have used data from the SELF study are provided in the open science framework (https://osf.io/je924/overview?view_only=486e440a60a74536b1155866260abe87). All scripts, the anonymized data used in the present analyses, and Supplemental Material are provided in the open science framework (https://osf.io/druj9/overview?view_only=b51f4d15af3e46d8ac957d1785c8bdf9).

2.3 Participants

Participants were recruited from the general German population through a pool that consisted of potential volunteers for participation in lab research. The link that people needed to follow to sign up to be included in the participant pool was announced in regional and national media outlets. As an incentive, participants received personal feedback on their self-esteem profiles after participating in the study. The participant pool was contacted in 2-year intervals in 2013 (Time 1), 2015 (Time 2), 2017 (Time 3), 2019 (Time 4), and 2021 (Time 5). At each time point, participants who had completed previous measurement occasions and new participants were included in the study. Participants who did not provide an anonymous identification code or who participated multiple times per time point were not considered in the final data set. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of demographic data at each measurement occasion. Of those participating at Time 1, $n = 248$ individuals also participated at Time 2, $n = 207$ participants participated at Time 3, $n = 209$ participated at Time 4, and $n = 164$ participated at Time 5. Of those individuals who participated at Time 2, $n = 221$ participated at Time 3, $n = 220$ participated at Time 4, and $n = 164$ participated at Time 5. Of the participants who participated at Time 3, $n = 258$ also participated at Time 4, and $n = 184$ participated at Time 5. Of the participants who participated at Time 4, $n = 301$ also participated at Time 5.

Table 1*Sample Size and Demographics Across Time Points*

Time point	Time 1 (2013)	Time 2 (2015)	Time 3 (2017)	Time 4 (2019)	Time 5 (2021)
Sample size <i>n</i>	634	523	523	633	399
<i>Age</i>					
<i>M (SD)</i>	47.0 (12.4)	48.9 (13.4)	48.8 (13.7)	48.8 (14.5)	53.4 (13.5)
Range	18-88	18-83	19-78	18-81	22-83
<i>Gender</i>					
Male (%)	190 (30.6%)	176 (34.1%)	177 (34.7%)	190 (31.4%)	118 (30.4%)
Female (%)	431 (69.4%)	340 (65.9%)	333 (65.3%)	415 (68.6%)	268 (69.1%)
Diverse (%)					2 (0.5%)
<i>Education</i>					
Lower secondary school degree (~ 9 years of education)	22 (3.5%)		13 (2.5%)	20 (3.3%)	13 (3.3%)
Intermediate school degree (~ 10 years of education)	142 (22.5%)		100 (19.6%)	106 (17.5%)	72 (18.6%)
College of applied sciences entrance qualification (~ 13 years of education)	71 (11.2%)		56 (11.0%)	61 (10.1%)	42 (10.8%)
High school degree/ university entrance qualification (~ 12 to 13 years of education)	120 (19.0%)		95 (18.6%)	123 (20.3%)	56 (14.4%)
College or university degree (~ 17 to 19 years of education)	277 (43.8%)		244 (47.8%)	294 (48.6%)	205 (52.8%)
No degree	0		2 (0.4%)	1 (0.2%)	0

Note. At Time 1, a total of 636 participants completed the questionnaire. Two participants were excluded from the final data set because they reported that they were underage. At Time 2, demographic measures (except age and gender) had not been assessed.

2.4 Measures

Table 2 provides an overview of measures used in the present study per time point.

2.4.1 Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem

To measure self-esteem, I used the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Scale (MSES;

Schütz et al., 2016), an instrument that has exhibited good reliability and validity in adult samples (Rentzsch et al., 2016). The MSES is the German adaptation of the scale created by Fleming and Courtney (1984). Based on the theoretical model provided by Shavelson et al. (1976) and on a revision of the Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Janis & Field, 1959), the scale by Fleming and Courtney (1984) measures the following five scales: self-regard (which I refer to as *global self-esteem* in the following), social confidence, school abilities, physical appearance, and physical abilities. Because analyses in the study by Fleming and Courtney (1984) resulted in a six-factor solution, with the social factor split into two subscales (i.e., social contact and social criticism), the MSES (Schütz et al., 2016) encompasses the following six subscales:

Global self-esteem (e.g., “Do you have a positive attitude toward yourself?”; “How often are you so unhappy with yourself that you wonder if you are a valuable person?” [reversed]) describes a person’s global perceptions of self-worth, independent of any particular domain. High scorers have high general self-acceptance, self-confidence, and positive self-evaluations.

Social contact (e.g., “Do you often feel uncomfortable in your own skin when you meet new people?” [reversed]; “How often do you feel self-conscious?” [reversed]) refers to a person’s social skills in the presence of others. High scorers are comfortable about being in contact with others and are confident in their social skills.

Social criticism (e.g., “How much do you think other people see you as a loser?” [reversed]; “How often do you think that others might criticize your work?” [reversed]) describes a person’s confidence in gaining the approval of others. High scorers are confident that they are accepted and positively evaluated by others.

Performance (e.g., “How often do you feel like you’ve done a really good job after you’ve completed a job?”; “How often are you convinced of your performance at work?”) describes how a person feels about their performance in certain areas. High scorers are

confident that their performances are good and that they exhibit competence in their occupation, job, work, or school.

Physical appearance (e.g., “How often do you wish you were more attractive?” [reversed]; “How convinced are you that you are considered a good-looking person?”) refers to a person’s evaluation of the appearance of their body. High scorers evaluate themselves as physically attractive and are satisfied with their body.

Physical ability (e.g., “How nervous do you get when people watch you while doing sports?” [reversed]; “Are you satisfied with your athletic ability?”) refers to a person’s evaluation of their abilities with respect to sports and physical coordination. High scorers have confidence in their physical abilities.

Each subscale consists of five to seven items. Participants responded to the 32 items on 7-point rating scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) for items measuring intensity and from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) for items measuring frequency. The MSES was assessed at all five time points. Longitudinal data on the MSES was used to model actual self-esteem change.

2.4.2 Perceived Self-Esteem Change

As adapted from Hudson et al. (2019), participants responded to the question, “Has your self-esteem decreased or increased?” at Time 5 and differentiated between “In the last 2 years” and “In the last 8 years” on a rating scale ranging from -3 (*decreased*) to 0 (*remained the same*) to +3 (*increased*) to assess *perceived global self-esteem change*. To assess *perceived domain-specific self-esteem change*, participants responded to each of the five items “Over the past 2 years, my self-esteem in the following areas: confidence in social situations; dealing with criticism; professional or technical performance; physical attractiveness, appearance; athleticism, physical coordination has ...” on a rating scale ranging from -3 (*decreased*) to 0 (*remained the same*) to +3 (*increased*).

2.4.3 Self-Esteem Change Goals

As adapted from Hudson et al. (2019), only at Time 5, participants responded to the item, “If I could change myself, I would wish that my self-esteem in the next 2 years would...” on a rating scale ranging from -3 (*decrease*) to 0 (*remain the same*) to +3 (*increase*) to assess *volitional global self-esteem change goals*. To assess *volitional domain-specific self-esteem change goals*, participants responded at Time 5 to the following five items: “If I could change myself, I would wish that my self-esteem in the following areas: confidence in social situations; dealing with criticism; professional or technical performance; physical attractiveness, appearance; athleticism, physical coordination in the next 2 years would...” on a rating scale ranging from -3 (*decrease*) to 0 (*remain the same*) to +3 (*increase*).

2.4.4 Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was assessed at Time 5 by using a validated one-item measure (“Now we want to know about your overall satisfaction with life. How satisfied are you with your life at the moment, all things considered?”) with responses made on a rating scale ranging from 0 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*) (Beierlein et al., 2015).

2.4.5 Depression

Across Times 3 to 5, depression was assessed with a validated one-item measure (“How much have you felt sad, depressed, or uninterested in life since last week?”) that was rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a little*) to 6 (*moderately*) to 9 (*very much*) (Young et al., 2014).

Table 2

Measures per Time-Point

Global and domain-specific self-esteem	Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, Time 4, Time 5
Perceived self-esteem change (last 2 years, last 8 years)	Time 5

Self-esteem change goals	Time 5
Life satisfaction	Time 5
Depression	Time 3, Time 4, Time 5

2.5 Analytic Strategy

All models were estimated with Mplus Version 8.11 (Muthén & Muthen, 1998-2024) by using the full information maximum likelihood estimator (see Enders, 2010). As preregistered, model fit was assessed with the χ^2 test statistic, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), such that values of the $CFI \geq .90$, $RMSEA \leq .08$, and $SRMR \leq .11$ were considered to reflect an acceptable fit to the data (Marsh et al., 2005). The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) are also reported. In accordance with the preregistration, $p < .05$ and 95% confidence intervals were computed for nondirectional hypotheses and exploratory analyses and $p < .10$ and 90% confidence intervals for directional hypotheses. Graphical representations of results were established by using the R package ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016).

2.5.1 Modeling Actual Self-Esteem Change

To specify a measurement model for global self-esteem, a first-order model representing the latent factor of the MSES' self-regard subscale was established. To specify measurement models pertaining to specific domains of self-esteem, first-order models were established for each of the domain-specific subscales of the MSES (i.e., social contact, social criticism, performance, physical appearance, physical ability). The same three manifest parcels were used as indicators of each latent self-esteem factor as reported in *Masked for Review* (2018, 2022) in line with the balancing technique as recommended by Little et al. (2002).

2.5.1.1 Measurement Invariance. Before addressing the research questions, every measurement model for each of the measures of self-esteem (i.e., global self-esteem and each

of the domains of self-esteem) was tested for invariance across the five time points. For each model, five latent factors were allowed to correlate: the latent factor from Time 1, the latent factor from Time 2, the latent factor from Time 3, the latent factor from Time 4, and the latent factor from Time 5. Furthermore, correlated residuals were included to account for the use of the same indicators across time (Bollen & Curran, 2006).

All models were tested for configural, weak, strong, and strict factorial invariance (Meredith, 1993). In accordance with Chen (2007) and Cheung and Rensvold (2002), a ΔCFI value smaller than or equal to .01 and a $\Delta RMSEA$ value smaller than .015 between nested models were regarded as indicating a nonsignificant decrement in fit between the models.

Table S1 in the Supplemental Material

(https://osf.io/druj9/overview?view_only=b51f4d15af3e46d8ac957d1785c8bdf9) presents the results from invariance testing, which established strict measurement invariance for all measures of self-esteem across the 8 years of assessment. All further latent factor models were based on the strict measurement invariance models.

2.5.1.2 Actual Mean-Level Change. To examine actual mean-level change, I ran True Intraindividual Change Models (TICMs; Steyer et al., 1997) for each global and domain-specific self-esteem measure separately. In these models, change is measured directly through latent difference variables. Latent difference variables represent individual differences in true intraindividual change over time corrected for random measurement error (Steyer et al., 1997). All TICMs were based on the respective measurement model. One set of analyses included latent difference variables between the latent factors and Time 1 (i.e., baseline models). All latent factors loaded on an initial latent factor at Time 1. Every factor later than Time 1 loaded on a latent difference factor indicating latent change between Time 1 and the measurement point of the specific factor. Latent mean-level change was assessed as the mean of the latent difference factor. A significant latent difference factor mean indicates that the mean change between Time 1 and the other time point was significantly different from zero; a

positive sign on the latent difference factor mean indicates that the latent factor scores had increased between the respective time points. The variance of the latent difference factor reflects individual differences in the latent change scores, indicating interindividual differences in intraindividual change. Another set of analyses included latent difference variables between the latent factors of neighboring time points (i.e., neighbor models). A TICM neighbor model is displayed in the left part of Figure 1.

2.5.2 Hypothesis Testing

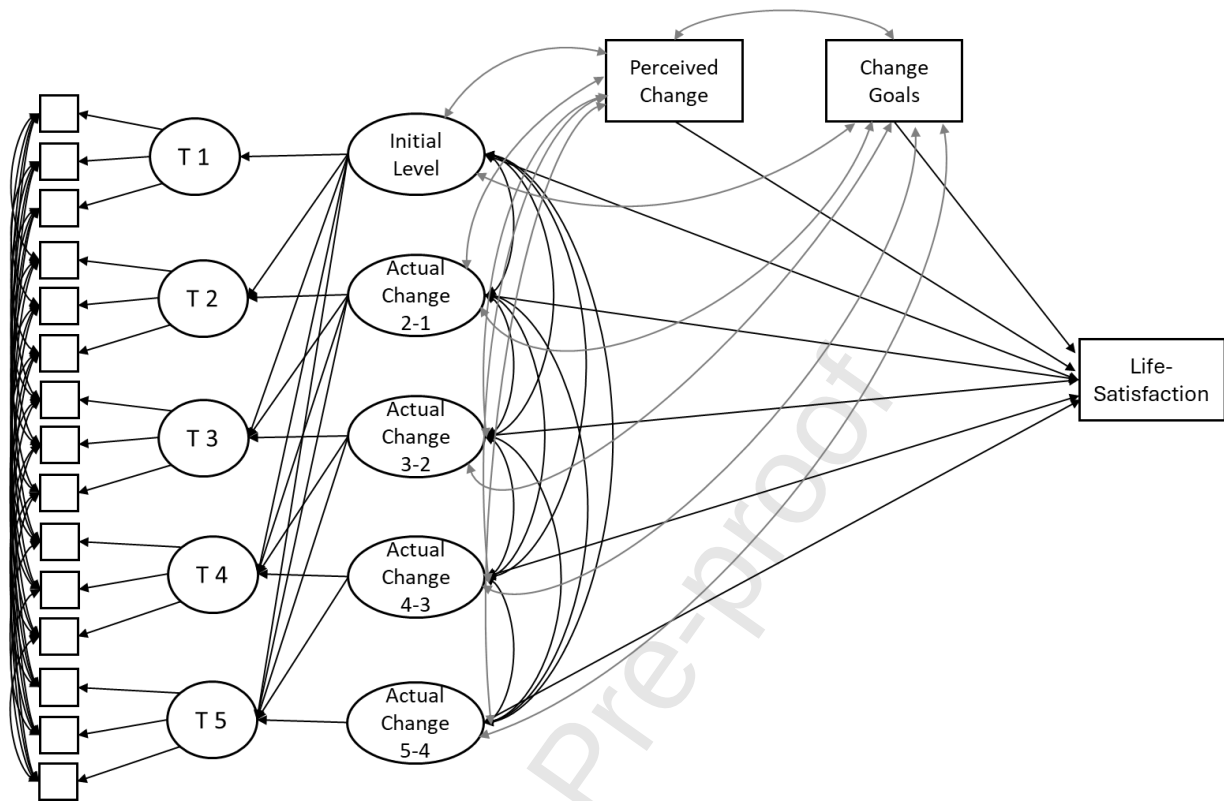
To investigate accuracy (Hypothesis 1), correlations were computed between the latent change scores in global (domain-specific) self-esteem between Time 4 and Time 5 based on a neighbor TICM and perceived change in global (domain-specific) self-esteem over the last 2 years assessed at Time 5. Furthermore, a correlation was computed between the latent change score in global self-esteem between Time 1 and Time 5 based on a baseline TICM and perceived change in global self-esteem over the last 8 years assessed at Time 5.

To investigate the association between the level of global self-esteem (domain-specific self-esteem) and change goals in global self-esteem (domain-specific self-esteem), the hypothesis (Hypothesis 3a) was tested by computing the correlation between the latent factor (the level) of global (domain-specific) self-esteem at Time 5 based on a strict measurement invariance model and change goals in global (domain-specific) self-esteem for the next 2 years assessed at Time 5.

To investigate the adaptiveness of actual, perceived, and change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem in terms of life satisfaction (Hypotheses 2a and 2b), life satisfaction as assessed at Time 5 was regressed on the change scores and on the initial level of global (domain-specific) self-esteem based on the neighbor change model as well as on perceived change and change goal scores in global (domain-specific) self-esteem as parallel predictors (see Figure 1 for a schematic display).

Figure 1

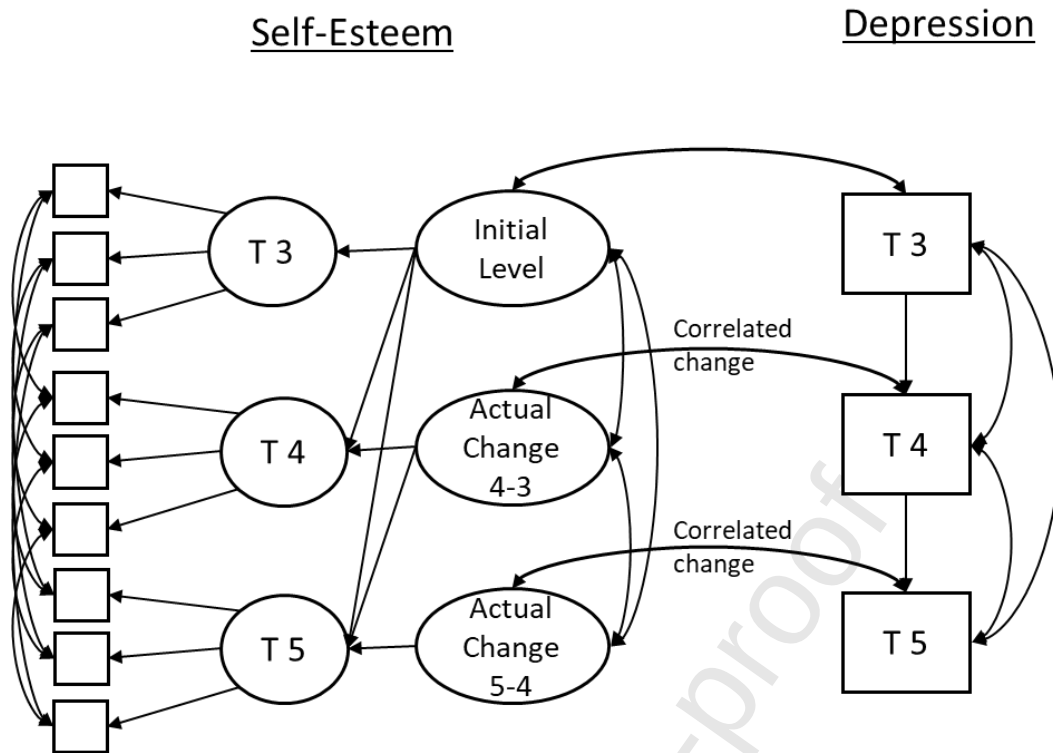
True Intraindividual Change Model (Actual Change), Perceived Change, and Change Goals in Self-Esteem Predicting Life Satisfaction



To investigate adaptiveness in terms of change in depression over time (Hypotheses 2c and 2d), correlations were computed between actual change scores in global (domain-specific) self-esteem from neighbor change models and depression assessed at the three respective time points (i.e., correlated change). In addition, a correlation was computed between perceived change in global self-esteem over the last 2 years assessed at Time 5 and the change in depression between Time 4 and Time 5. To model change in depression, a residualized change score model was established on the basis of the assessments from Times 3 to 5 (see Figure 2 for a schematic display).

Figure 2

Modelling Correlated Change Between Self-Esteem and Depression



Note. This model specifies covariances between change scores from a True Intraindividual Change Model on Self-Esteem (left side) and from a residualized change score model on depression (right side) comprising data from Time 3, Time 4, and Time 5.

3. Results

The organization of the Results section corresponds to the central research questions. First, descriptive findings are presented for actual change, perceived change, and change goals in self-esteem, followed by analyses of their interrelationships and their associations with life satisfaction and depressive symptoms.

3.1 Do People Exhibit, Perceive, or Want Change in Their Multidimensional Self-Esteem?

To examine whether individuals show actual change, perceived change, or change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem, I first inspected the descriptive statistics of all three change indicators across the respective self-esteem domains.

3.1.1 Actual Change

Consistent with previous research, findings revealed a slight mean-level increase in actual global self-esteem and several self-esteem domains over time (see Table 3, Figure 3; actual trajectories based on neighbor models are displayed in Figure S1 of the Supplement). By contrast, physical appearance self-esteem showed no average increase, and physical ability self-esteem exhibited slight mean-level declines ($M = -0.004, -0.083$, across 2 and 8 years, respectively). Most notably, however, there were substantial interindividual differences in actual change. Whereas some individuals showed pronounced increases in self-esteem, others experienced decreases, and still others exhibited little to no change across the observed 2- to 8-year periods.

Table 3

Actual Mean-Level Change in Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem Across 2 to 8 Years

(Domains of) Self-esteem	Last 2 years		Last 8 years	
	M_{change}	VAR_{change}	M_{change}	VAR_{change}
Global self-esteem	0.05 [-0.02, 0.12]	0.27* [0.19, 0.34]	0.18* [0.09, 0.28]	0.60* [0.43, 0.78]
Social contact	0.05 [-0.03, 0.13]	0.33* [0.22, 0.43]	0.15* [0.05, 0.26]	0.81* [0.60, 1.02]
Social criticism	0.15* [0.06, 0.23]	0.43* [0.31, 0.55]	0.29* [0.17, 0.40]	0.92* [0.67, 1.17]
Performance	0.06 [-0.02, 0.13]	0.32* [0.22, 0.42]	0.09* [0.001, 0.19]	0.63* [0.45, 0.80]
Physical appearance	0.05 [-0.04, 0.14]	0.53* [0.40, 0.67]	0.06 [-0.06, 0.17]	0.99* [0.74, 1.25]

Physical ability	-0.004	0.18*	-0.08	0.32*
	[-0.08, 0.07]	[0.09, 0.27]	[-0.17, 0.002]	[0.17, 0.46]

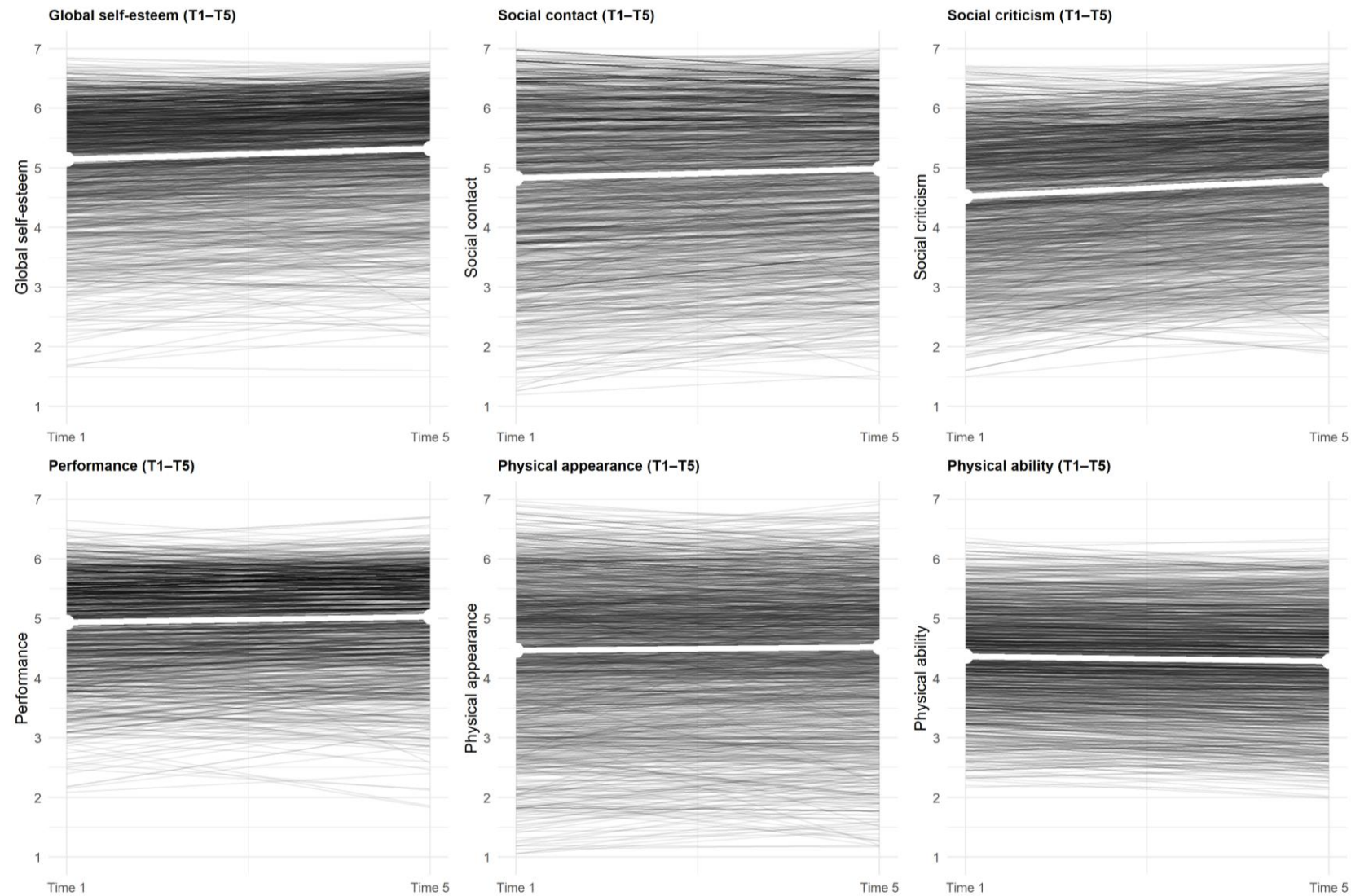
Note. Responses were given on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) for items measuring intensity and from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) for items measuring frequency. Coefficients are based on True Intraindividual Change Models; 95% confidence intervals are included in brackets.⁴ $N = 1484$ -1490 effective sample size due to missing data.

* $p < .05$.

⁴ At Time 5, hypotheses on mean-level changes were not preregistered; therefore, all significance tests were two-tailed. For preregistered analyses of mean-level change in global and domain-specific self-esteem (including latent Cohen's d) across 6 years of measurement, see Rentzsch and Schröder-Abé (2021).

Figure 3

Individual and Mean Trajectories in Actual Self-Esteem Change (Global and Domain-Specific) Across 8 Years of Measurement



3.1.2 Perceived Self-Esteem Change and Change Goals

With respect to self-esteem change goals—that is, how individuals want their self-esteem to change the next 2 years—participants showed, on average, an endorsement of change goals, accompanied by substantial interindividual variability across all self-esteem domains (Table 4). Importantly, across domains, almost no participants selected response options that referred to a desire for declines in self-esteem. For global self-esteem, approximately one quarter of participants reported no desire for change (about 23%), whereas the remaining participants were distributed across the remaining response options, with roughly another quarter indicating a desire for an increase in global self-esteem over the next 2 years. A very similar pattern emerged across the self-esteem domains (see also Figure 4 for a graphical display of results).

A different picture emerged for perceived self-esteem change over the past 2 to 8 years. On average, participants reported perceived increases in both global and domain-specific self-esteem across most domains. An exception was physical self-esteem, for which participants, on average, indicated a slight perceived decline over the last 2 years. Notably, for all self-esteem domains, participants used the full response range, including perceived decreases, increases, and stability, underscoring substantial individual differences in perceived self-esteem change (see also Figure 4).

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Change and Change Goals in Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem

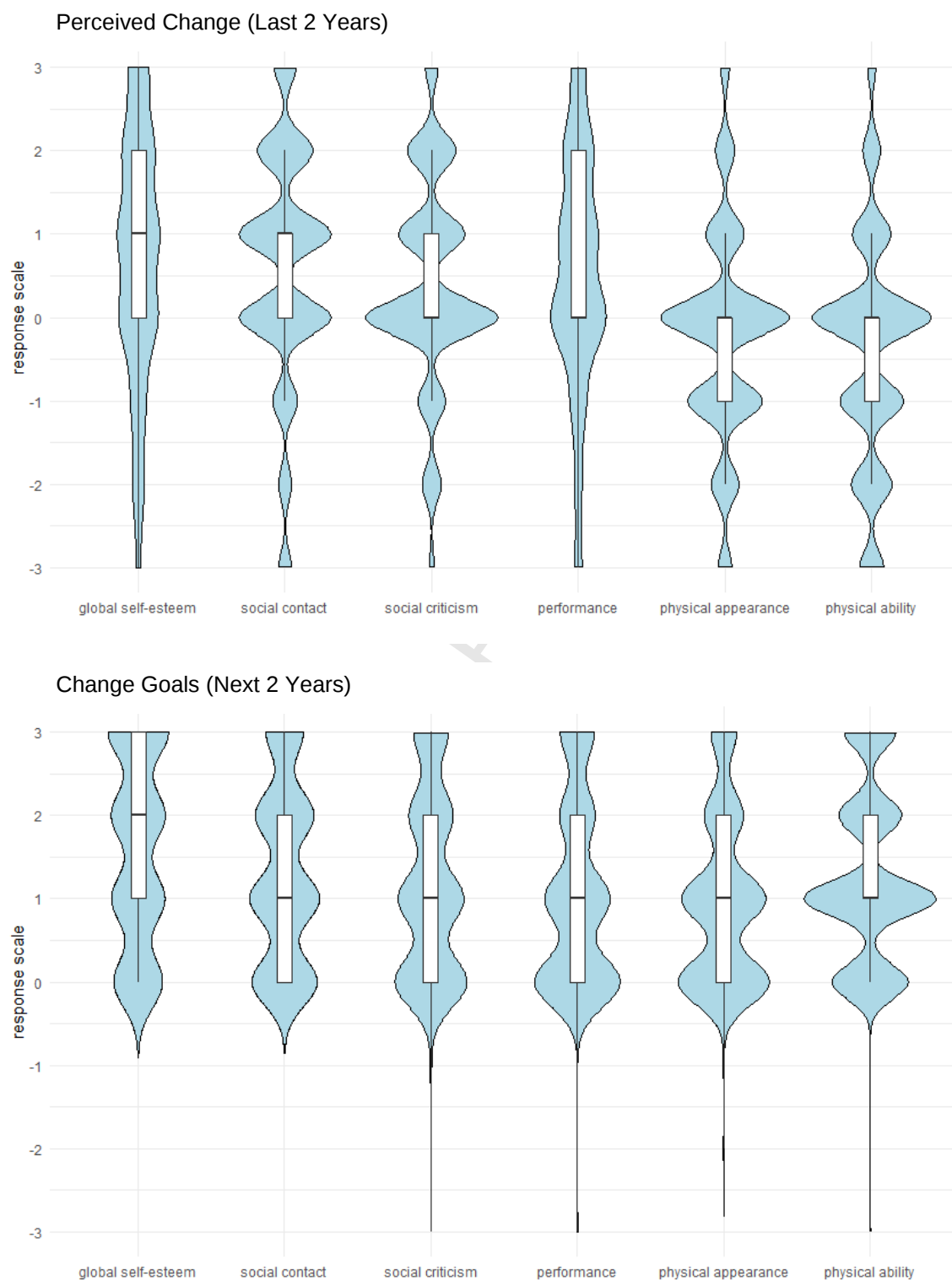
(Domains of) Self-esteem	Perceived change (last 8 years)		Perceived change (last 2 years)		Change goals (next 2 years)	
	M_{change}	SD_{change}	M_{change}	SD_{change}	M_{change}	SD_{change}
Global self-esteem	1.12	1.69	0.71	1.51	1.58	1.12

Social contact	0.58	1.38	1.30	1.05
Social criticism	0.39	1.24	1.16	1.11
Performance	0.54	1.44	1.07	1.10
Physical appearance	-0.22	1.25	0.98	1.00
Physical ability	-0.38	1.36	1.27	1.02

Note. Responses were given on rating scales ranging from -3 (*decrease/d*) to 0 (*remain/ed the same*) to +3 (*increase/d*). *N* = 390 at Time 5.

Figure 4

Boxplots and Violin Plots of Perceived Change (Last 2 Years) and Change Goals (Next 2 Years) in Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem



Note. Box plots show the median (central line), interquartile range (box), and whiskers for each variable. Violin plots display the distribution of scores using kernel density estimation, where wider sections indicate a higher concentration of observations. The response scale ranges from -3 (decrease/d) to 0 (remain/ed the same) to +3 (increase/d).

3.2 Do People Have Accurate Perceptions of Their Self-Esteem Change?

Next, I examined whether participants' subjective perceptions of past self-esteem change corresponded to their actual self-esteem trajectories. As preregistered, the results indicated that perceived change in both global and domain-specific self-esteem was significantly associated with actual change across the 2-year observation period (plus across 8 years for global self-esteem, $r = .29$, $p < .001$, see Table 5). Thus, participants who perceived an increase in their global self-esteem also showed an actual increase, whereas participants who reported perceived declines (e.g., in physical self-esteem) indeed exhibited corresponding actual declines (and vice versa). Accuracy coefficients across the self-esteem domains ranged from $r = .21$ (social criticism) to $r = .52$ (performance self-esteem), all $ps < .001$.

Table 5

Correspondence Between Actual Change and Perceived Change (Accuracy)

(Domains of) Self-esteem	Accuracy – last 8 years (r)	Accuracy – last 2 years (r)
Global self-esteem	.29* (0.05) [0.21, 0.38]	.39* (0.06) [0.28, 0.48]
Social contact		.27* (0.06) [0.17, 0.38]
Social criticism		.21* (0.06) [0.11, 0.30]
Performance		.52* (0.05) [0.44, 0.60]
Physical appearance		.47* (0.05) [0.39, 0.55]

	.45* (0.07)
Physical ability	[0.33, 0.56]

Note. Accuracy scores were computed as correlations between actual change scores from True Intraindividual Change Models and perceived change scores; standard errors are included in parentheses, and 90% confidence intervals are presented in brackets. $N = 1484$ -1490 effective sample size due to missing data.

* $p < .05$.

3.3 Who Wants to Change?

Previous research on personality traits has shown that individuals are particularly motivated to change socially desirable characteristics that they perceive they lack (Thielmann & de Vries, 2021). Focusing specifically on self-esteem, the present analyses revealed a very similar pattern. In line with the preregistered hypothesis, lower levels of self-esteem were associated with greater intentions to increase self-esteem, irrespective of whether global or domain-specific self-esteem was considered (Table 6). Across the self-esteem domains, the associations between self-esteem levels and subsequent change goals ranged from $r = -.20$ for global self-esteem to $r = -.09$ for social contact, all $ps < .001$. Similarly, further exploratory analyses showed that previous actual decreases in self-esteem predicted stronger intentions to increase in self-esteem when controlling for initial levels of self-esteem and former changes (Table 6). Across self-esteem domains, the associations between actual self-esteem change over the last two years and goals to increase self-esteem over the next two years ranged from $\beta = -.45$ for physical ability self-esteem to $\beta = -.21$ for social contact, all $ps < .05$.

Table 6

Associations Between Global and Domain-Specific Self-Esteem Change Goals and Self-Esteem Level and Actual Change

(Domains of) Self-esteem	Self-esteem level–change goals (r)	Actual change–change goals (β)
-----------------------------	--	---

Global self-esteem	-.20* ^a (0.04) [-0.26, -0.13]	-.27* (0.08) [-0.43, -0.10]
Social contact	-.09* ^a (0.03) [-0.14, -0.04]	-.21* (0.10) [-0.41, -0.02]
Social criticism	-.16* ^a (0.04) [-0.22, -0.10]	-.29* (0.09) [-0.47, -0.12]
Performance	-.18* ^a (0.04) [-0.24, -0.12]	-.32* (0.10) [-0.51, -0.14]
Physical appearance	-.19* ^a (0.04) [-0.26, -0.137]	-.21* (0.08) [-0.37, -0.06]
Physical ability	-.17* ^a (0.03) [-0.22, -0.11]	-.45* (0.13) [-0.70, -0.20]

Note. Correlation coefficients (r) represent the associations between self-esteem levels at Time 5 based on strict measurement invariance models and change goal scores. Regression coefficients (β) describe the association between actual self-esteem change over the last two years and self-esteem change goals when controlling for initial self-esteem level and previous actual changes in self-esteem based on True Intraindividual Change Models (neighbor model); standard errors are included in parentheses, and 95% confidence intervals are presented in brackets. $N = 1484$ -1490 effective sample size due to missing data.

^a In line with the preregistered criterion based on one-tailed testing ($p < .10$ and 90% confidence interval).

* $p < .05$.

3.4 Is it Adaptive to Exhibit, Perceive, or Want Self-Esteem Change?

A central aim of the present study was to examine whether actual, perceived, and change goals in self-esteem were adaptive. To address this question, first, I tested their associations with life satisfaction as a positive indicator of well-being. I then examined their relationships with actual changes in depressive symptoms as an indicator of maladjustment.

3.4.1 Life Satisfaction

To examine whether changes in actual self-esteem, perceived changes and self-esteem change goals might be adaptive with respect to life satisfaction, I regressed life satisfaction on prior actual self-esteem change, initial self-esteem level, perceived change, and self-esteem change goals simultaneously (see also Hudson et al., 2019, for a similar approach). These analyses were conducted separately for global self-esteem and each self-esteem domain. This analytic approach allowed me to test whether subjective perceptions of self-esteem change contributed to life satisfaction above and beyond actual change and baseline self-esteem.

Table 7 presents the results. Analyses in which actual change, perceived change, and change goals in self-esteem were not included as simultaneous predictors are presented in

Supplemental Material Table S2

(https://osf.io/druj9/overview?view_only=b51f4d15af3e46d8ac957d1785c8bdf9).

Table 7

Effects of Actual Change, Perceived Change, and Change Goals in Self-Esteem as Parallel Predictors of Life Satisfaction

(Domains of) Self-esteem	Actual change (last 2 years) (β)	Perceived change (last 2 years) (β)	Change goals (next 2 years) (β)
Global self-esteem	.30* ^a (0.08) [0.17, 0.42] ^a	.30* ^a (0.05) [0.21, 0.38] ^a	-.12 (0.06) [-0.24, 0.002]
Social contact	.08 (0.09) [-0.10, 0.25]	.38* (0.05) [0.29, 0.47]	-.17* (0.06) [-0.29, -0.05]
Social criticism	.28* (0.09) [0.11, 0.45]	.18* (0.05) [0.07, 0.28]	.04 (0.06) [-0.08, 0.15]
Performance	.31* (0.10) [0.10, 0.51]	.15* (0.07) [0.01, 0.29]	-.03 (0.05) [-0.14, 0.07]
Physical appearance	.23* (0.09) [0.04, 0.41]	.24* (0.07) [0.10, 0.39]	-.06 (0.06) [-0.17, 0.06]
Physical ability	-.05 (0.16) [-0.36, 0.26]	.24* (0.08) [0.09, 0.39]	-.10 (0.07) [-0.24, 0.04]

Note. Regression coefficients controlling for initial self-esteem and previous actual changes in self-esteem and including actual, perceived, and change goals in global (domain-specific) self-esteem as parallel predictors; standard errors are included in parentheses, and 95% confidence intervals are presented in brackets. $N = 1484$ -1490 effective sample size due to missing data.

^a In line with the preregistered criterion based on one-tailed testing ($p < .10$ and 90% confidence interval).

* $p < .05$.

Consistent with the preregistered hypotheses, actual increases in global self-esteem were positively associated with higher subsequent life satisfaction, independent of initial global self-esteem and independent of perceived change or change goals ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). This adaptive pattern of actual self-esteem change also emerged for most self-esteem domains, with the exception of social contact ($\beta = .08, p = .38$) and physical ability self-esteem ($\beta = -.05, p = .74$).

Across all self-esteem domains and for global self-esteem, perceived increases in self-esteem over the past 2 years were positively associated with higher life satisfaction, independent of actual change (β s ranged from .15 for performance self-esteem to .38 for social contact self-esteem, all $ps < .05$). Thus, subjectively experiencing an increase in self-esteem above and beyond empirically observed change was linked to greater life satisfaction. However, life satisfaction was assessed only at Time 5; accordingly, these findings are cross-sectional in nature and do not allow for longitudinal conclusions about directional effects.

By contrast, self-esteem change goals were only significantly negatively associated with life satisfaction for social contact self-esteem ($\beta = -.17, p = .01$); none of the other domains revealed significant effects. Participants who expressed stronger desires to enhance their social contact self-esteem reported lower life satisfaction, with baseline levels in self-esteem and previous change being controlled for.

3.4.2 Change in Depression

To examine whether changes in self-esteem were associated with changes in depressive symptoms, I analyzed both the parallel trajectories of self-esteem and depression over time and the association between perceived self-esteem change and actual change in depression during the final assessment interval. Table 7 presents the results. Exploratory

analyses on the association between change in depression over the last two years and change goals in self-esteem for the next two years are also reported in Table 8.

Table 8

Associations Between Actual Change, Perceived Change, and Change Goals in Self-Esteem and Change in Depression

(Domains of Self-esteem)	Actual change (2 year intervals) (covariance of change)	Perceived change (last 2 years) (<i>r</i>)	Change goals (next 2 years) (<i>r</i>)
Global self-esteem	-0.62* ^a (0.08) [-0.75, -.49] ^a	-0.26* ^a (0.04) [-0.32, -0.19] ^a	.24* (0.04) [0.16, 0.31]
Social contact	-0.28* (0.08) [-0.44, -0.13]	-0.23* (0.04) [-0.31, -0.15]	.16* (0.04) [0.07, 0.24]
Social criticism	-0.37* (0.08) [-0.54, -0.21]	-0.21* (0.04) [-0.29, -0.13]	.12* (0.04) [0.03, 0.20]
Performance	-0.34* (0.07) [-0.47, -0.21]	-0.19* (0.04) [-0.27, -0.10]	.12* (0.04) [0.03, 0.21]
Physical appearance	-0.30* (0.08) [-0.46, -0.14]	-0.15* (0.04) [-0.24, -0.07]	.06 (0.05) [-0.03, 0.15]
Physical ability	-0.16* (0.07) [-0.28, -0.03]	-0.12* (0.04) [-0.20, -0.03]	.05 (0.05) [-0.04, 0.14]

Note. Covariance of change presents associations between actual change scores in self-esteem based on a True Intraindividual Change Model (neighbor) and residualized change in depression in 2-year intervals between Time 3 – Time 5. Correlation coefficients present associations between perceived change scores or change goal scores at Time 5 and change in depression over the last 2-year interval based on a residualized change score model across Time 3-Time 5; standard errors are included in parentheses, and 95% confidence intervals are presented in brackets. *N* = 972-980 effective sample size for analyses across Time 3-Time 5 on actual self-esteem change and change in depression due to missing data. *N* = 942 for correlational analyses on perceived change or self-esteem change goals and change in depression using on Time3-Time 5 data.

^a In line with the preregistered criterion based on one-tailed testing ($p < .10$ and 90% confidence interval).

* $p < .05$.

Supporting the preregistered hypothesis, actual 2-year increases in global self-esteem were accompanied by parallel decreases in depressive symptoms ($b = -0.62, p < .001$). The same pattern emerged across all self-esteem domains (covariance between change scores ranged from $\text{cov} = -0.16, p = .02$ for physical ability self-esteem to $\text{cov} = -0.37, p < .001$ for social criticism self-esteem), although the association was particularly strong for changes in global self-esteem.

In addition, as preregistered, perceived increases in global and domain-specific self-esteem over the past 2-year period were significantly associated with actual prior decreases in depressive symptoms (correlation coefficients ranged from $r = -.12, p = .01$ for physical ability self-esteem to $r = -.23, p < .001$ for social contact self-esteem and $r = -.26, p < .001$ for global self-esteem). Results from non-registered exploratory analyses further indicated that stronger desires to increase in self-esteem over the next 2 years were associated with greater preceding increases in depressive symptoms (correlation coefficients ranged from $r = .12, p = .01$ for performance self-esteem to $r = .16, p < .001$ for social contact self-esteem and $r = .24, p < .001$ for global self-esteem), with the exception of the physical self-esteem domains ($ps > .21$).

4. Discussion

To date, research on self-esteem change has primarily focused on actual trajectories, particularly in global self-esteem. Drawing on insights from the literature on personality traits, such as the Big Five and HEXACO, the present study represents a first attempt to examine the concepts of actual change, perceived change, and change goals in self-esteem and to evaluate their adaptive significance. By explicitly considering self-esteem as a multidimensional construct, this investigation allows for a more nuanced understanding of both global self-

esteem and its specific domains, highlighting how different areas of self-evaluation may follow distinct patterns of change and have different relationships with well-being outcomes.

4.1 Change Goals and Perceived Change in Self-Esteem

The present findings indicate that, on average, people express a desire to enhance their self-esteem, both globally and across specific domains. Importantly, there is substantial interindividual variability in these volitional change goals. Consistent with research on socially desirable personality traits (e.g., Quintus et al., 2017; Thielmann & de Vries, 2021), individuals were particularly motivated to improve in areas where they scored relatively low, suggesting that self-improvement goals are most pronounced when there is an objective discrepancy between current and desired self-evaluations (Baranski et al., 2021). This interpretation is further supported by the finding that, independent of individuals' absolute levels of global and domain-specific self-esteem, those who had experienced actual declines in self-esteem in prior years were particularly likely to strive for subsequent increases. Thus, individuals who may have started from comparatively higher levels of self-esteem but nevertheless experienced declines also showed this pattern, indicating a tendency to restore or maintain previously attained levels of self-worth. These findings are consistent with self-evaluation maintenance theories, which posit that individuals are motivated to preserve a generally positive self-view and to counteract perceived threats or declines in self-evaluations (Tesser, 2000).

Similarly, participants demonstrated a notable degree of accuracy in perceiving changes in their self-esteem over time. On average, they reported increases in global and domain-specific self-esteem over the preceding 2 years, with the exception of physical self-esteem, which, on average, showed a slight decline. Crucially, these subjective perceptions corresponded closely to actual changes, indicating that individuals are generally aware of both improvements and declines in their self-evaluations (see also findings from Chung et al., 2014, for global self-esteem). Accuracy was particularly pronounced in the performance self-

esteem domain and was significantly higher than in more socially oriented domains of self-esteem. This pattern may reflect the fact that performance self-esteem is often linked to objectively more observable life outcomes—such as a promotion at work or a poor grade in school—providing clear external feedback that enhances individuals' awareness of change.

The decrease in physical self-esteem may reflect typical age-related or biophysiological changes in adulthood and underscores the importance of differentiating between self-esteem domains rather than relying solely on global measures (see Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2021, for a detailed discussion). Together, these results highlight the multidimensional nature of self-esteem, showing that both change goals and perceived changes are meaningfully patterned across different domains of self-evaluation.

4.2 The Adaptiveness of Actual Change, Perceived Change, and Self-Esteem Change Goals

The findings suggest that actual changes in self-esteem are generally adaptive. Specifically, actual increases in self-esteem predicted higher life satisfaction, with the exception of the social contact and physical ability domains, and were negatively associated with changes in depressive symptoms. These results are consistent with prior research linking rising global self-esteem to reduced depression and enhanced well-being (Aebi & Orth, 2025; Orth et al., 2012; Zell & Johansson, 2025). An explanation for the finding that actual changes in physical ability self-esteem were unrelated to life satisfaction may be partly attributable to limited interindividual variability in actual change, as most participants reported either no change or slight decreases in physical ability self-esteem over time, thereby restricting the potential for associations with life satisfaction. One possible explanation for the absence of an association between changes in social contact self-esteem and life satisfaction is that social connectedness may represent a relatively normative baseline in adulthood, such that incremental changes in perceived social competence or ease of interaction do not substantially alter life satisfaction unless they reflect more pronounced deficits. This interpretation should

be considered tentative, however, particularly because actual changes in social contact self-esteem were in fact associated with life satisfaction when baseline self-esteem was not controlled for (see Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials). This pattern suggests that the relation between social contact self-esteem change and well-being may depend on the broader self-evaluative context in which such changes occur. Notably, decreases in depression were accompanied by increases in global and all domains of self-esteem and vice versa. The association was particularly pronounced for global self-esteem, highlighting previous findings that broad, overall improvements in self-worth may confer the greatest protective effects against depressive symptoms (see also Orth & Robins, 2013).

By contrast, expressing self-esteem change goals in the social domain was negatively associated with life satisfaction, even when baseline self-esteem levels and prior actual or perceived changes were controlled for. One possible interpretation is that setting ambitious or unrealistic self-improvement goals may be frustrating or exhausting, particularly if individuals struggle to achieve them. Importantly, change goals and life satisfaction were assessed concurrently, making it impossible to rule out a bidirectional relationship: Lower life satisfaction in and of itself may contribute to stronger desires to enhance social contact self-esteem (see Hudson et al., 2016, for a similar discussion of volitional Big Five personality trait change). Why this pattern emerged specifically for social contact self-esteem remains a question for future research (and in part for global self-esteem, when baseline levels were not controlled for, see Table S2). However, it seems plausible that the social domain plays a particularly important role for life satisfaction (Luhmann et al., 2013). Consistent with this idea, previous research has shown that extraversion—a socially oriented Big Five trait—is among the traits individuals most strongly desire to improve, and that such desires are particularly associated with lower life satisfaction (Hudson et al., 2020; Stieger et al., 2020). In line with this reasoning, the present findings further indicated that individuals who had experienced increases in depressive symptoms also reported stronger desires to enhance their

self-esteem, suggesting that lower well-being may, in turn, amplify the motivation for self-improvement in an effort to enhance psychological well-being (see also Stieger et al., 2020).

Perceived changes in self-esteem proved particularly important for adaptive outcomes. Across all domains, participants who perceived increases in their self-esteem reported higher life satisfaction independent of actual change and of baseline self-esteem, and showed greater previous reductions in depressive symptoms. This finding aligns with personality trait research that has shown that subjective perceptions of personality development are meaningfully linked to well-being (e.g., Hudson et al., 2019). These results resonate with theoretical perspectives on self-enhancement, which posit that the subjective experience of self-improvement is inherently adaptive and contributes to psychological functioning (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). At the same time, and based on the correlational nature of the data, the reverse mechanism may also be at play. People who are generally quite satisfied with their lives may be looking at the world more optimistically and may believe that their self-esteem must have improved; and people who experience a reduction in depressive symptoms may also be more likely to believe that their self-esteem has increased over the last few years. However, prior longitudinal research on self-esteem has consistently suggested that the direction of effects primarily runs from self-esteem to depressive symptoms, in line with the vulnerability model (Aebi & Orth, 2025; Orth & Robins, 2013). Nevertheless, it remains an important task for future research to more precisely disentangle the directionality between perceived changes in global and domain-specific self-esteem and well-being outcomes.

Taken together, these findings echo humanistic theories in emphasizing the importance of self-actualization and the pursuit of becoming a fully functioning person (Rogers, 1961). Even when perceived improvements are not fully aligned with actual changes, the subjective experience of growth appears to play a crucial role in well-being, underscoring the significance of perceived and volitional aspects of self-esteem alongside actual developmental trajectories.

4.3 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The present findings have several implications for both research and practice but also come with important limitations. First, life satisfaction and depressive symptoms were assessed with single-item measures, and life satisfaction was measured only at Time 5, and thus, longitudinal conclusions cannot be drawn about directional effects on life satisfaction.

Despite this limitation, the observed association between perceived positive self-esteem change and well-being suggests that fostering awareness of personal growth may be beneficial. Such insights could inform interventions, for instance, by encouraging individuals to reflect on positive intraindividual developments. Future research could examine these effects in a domain-specific manner to determine whether certain self-esteem domains are particularly relevant for adaptive intervention outcomes.

Changes in actual self-esteem emerged as important correlates of depression trajectories. These findings suggest that monitoring global and domain-specific self-esteem levels and their temporal trajectories could be useful in clinical contexts, potentially serving as transdiagnostic indicators of mental health. At the same time, the present study indicates that a strong drive to enhance self-esteem may be not unequivocally beneficial. Intended social self-esteem change goals were negatively associated with life satisfaction, reflecting similar findings in research on the Big Five (Hudson et al., 2019). Further longitudinal work is needed to clarify the consequences of self-esteem change goals and their potential boundary conditions. Methodologically, given that very few participants indicated that they wanted their self-esteem to decline in any domain—a pattern likely relevant to other socially desirable constructs as well (see Baranski et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2019; Thielmann et al., 2021)—future studies should consider how to measure self-esteem change goals more effectively, for example, by focusing on a range from no desire for change to a desire for strong self-enhancement.

The present study assessed self-esteem *change goals*, that is, individuals' desires to

improve their self-esteem, but did not capture *volitional change*, defined as the enactment of these goals in sustained, goal-directed behavior. Accordingly, the present findings refer to motivational orientations rather than the processes through which such intentions are translated into actual change. Future research should build on this distinction by examining whether and how self-esteem change goals are implemented in everyday behavior and the conditions under which they lead to subsequent changes in self-esteem. Integrating behavioral indicators or intervention-based approaches would be particularly informative in this regard (see also Haehner et al., 2024).

Furthermore, previous research on personality trait change has shown that individuals are particularly motivated to change traits such as neuroticism and extraversion in socially desirable directions (e.g., Hudson et al., 2020; Stieger et al., 2020). Notably, these traits are also closely associated with self-esteem (e.g., Marsh et al., 2006; Rentzsch et al., 2022). Future research should therefore further investigate why certain individual differences emerge as particularly salient targets of trait change goals (see also Hudson et al., 2020). In particular, it would be important to disentangle the unique effects of self-esteem-related change goals from broader motivations to attain socially desirable characteristics more generally.

Finally, the present sample was nonrepresentative: On average, participants were highly educated, and women were overrepresented. Hence, replication in more diverse and non-western samples (Thalmayer, 2026) is necessary to establish the generalizability of these findings. Furthermore, although the present sample comprised a large age-range, investigating the current research questions using a larger, age-balanced sample that allows for comparisons between age groups could help to investigate whether the results are specific to certain developmental periods or can be generalized across the life span.

On a positive note, the present study was preregistered before the Time 5 data were collected, increasing the transparency and robustness of the present analyses.

4.4 Conclusion

In sum, the present study provides novel insights into actual change, perceived change, and change goals in global and domain-specific self-esteem. Actual self-esteem changes emerged as broadly adaptive, predicting higher life satisfaction and decreases in depressive symptoms, particularly for global self-esteem. Perceived changes in all domains were also meaningful: Individuals' subjective awareness of self-esteem growth was linked to well-being above and beyond actual change. By contrast, social self-esteem change goals were associated with lower life satisfaction. These findings underscore the importance of considering self-esteem as a multidimensional construct and differentiating between its domains. Together, the results suggest that both empirically observed development and subjective experiences of change contribute to psychological functioning, with implications for research, clinical practice, and interventions that foster awareness of personal growth. At the same time, the present findings pertain to motivational orientations (i.e., change goals) rather than their behavioral enactment. Future research is needed to examine how such goals are translated into volitional self-esteem change across domains and under which conditions they lead to actual developmental gains, particularly to inform intervention efforts.

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Highlights

- Actual, perceived, and desired self-esteem change were examined longitudinally
- Lower self-esteem predicted stronger goals to increase self-esteem
- Perceived self-esteem change closely matched actual change, especially in performance
- Actual and perceived increases predicted higher well-being and lower depression
- Self-esteem change goals were linked to lower life satisfaction in the social domain