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This book addresses the question of stability and change in our concepts of ourselves. The self is described as part of an ecological system, seen as a conjunction of other people, environments, and objects. These serve as the sources and settings, instruments and symbols of social experience. The external elements of the ecological system are reflected in self-related cognitions: so long as the ecology of the self is stable, the self-concept will likewise achieve stability. Self-concept change, therefore, can be studied from the point of view of change in the relationship between person and environment. Using a multi-method, multi-study approach, Stefan Hormuth takes relocation as his paradigm for assessing the meaning of the physical environment for the self-concept and everyday social behaviour.

This book presents results from an original and important research programme which is innovative both theoretically and methodologically. The author integrates social and psychological theorizing about identity and the self, and achieves an effective balance between the theoretical approach and his empirical investigations.

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The ecology of the self

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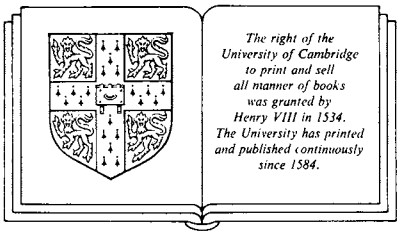
The ecology of the self

Relocation and self-concept change

Stefan E. Hormuth
Institute of Psychology, University of Heidelberg



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For Verena,
who has had her share of
experiences with relocation

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Preface

This book is about the relationship between humans and their environment. I have tried to look at this relationship from the perspective of the self-concept: what do the people around us, the places where we live, and the way we create our home contribute to our understanding of self?

As a social psychologist, I draw upon a tradition which the study of the self has had in this field. At the same time, the sources of modern self-concept research, like William James and George Herbert Mead, have been sources not only for a stream of social-psychological research, but also for other fields, notably sociological work on self and identity. Thus, the study of the self-concept cannot be restricted to one discipline alone: it not only allows but necessitates taking an interdisciplinary approach. Studying this in an ecological context leads one into other fields again, such as environmental psychology.

I have chosen a specific paradigm, namely relocation, to study changes in person–environment relationships. When one moves from one place to another, new friendships may form and others change, and a different life may be lived, but our home may allow us to build some continuity. I see relocation as an opportunity for self-concept change. Beyond the work described in this book, the choice of relocation as a research paradigm has led me to some further interesting work, both of a basic and applied nature, on relocation, the stress it can place on families, and the experiences people gain from it.

The work described here has had a long and personal history that makes it impossible to thank all people who have contributed in many ways, through ideas, discussion, and critique, as collaborators, research participants, and friends. I will name a few and will not forget the others. Robert A. Wicklund and Thomas D. Cook not only provided me with ideas, but taught me how to be a social psychologist. I was fortunate to be able to work in two environments that were supportive and gave me plenty of freedom for my work. When I was an NIMH Postdoctoral Fellow at Northwestern University, Tom Cook was responsible for my having two years to develop the bases for the later work that I did at the University of Heidelberg, where C. F. Graumann gave me the necessary independence. The empirical work

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The final typescript was read and commented on by several people, among them Mark Snyder, William Ickes, and Richard Lazarus. I am most grateful to Sheldon Stryker, who was supportive and encouraging from the outset. He read the whole typescript and wrote many pages of comments – I only hope I did justice to his efforts.

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