Self Concept: The paradigm shift and implications for schools

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Initial Investigations into the development of self-concept have been largely descriptive and focused primarily on the concept of self-representation, namely, how the me-self evolves across childhood and adolescence. Investigators sought to document developmental differences in self-representation through coding of spontaneously generated descriptions of the self. These efforts identified broad, discontinuous, qualitative skills in how the self was described. However, there was little analysis of the structural organization of self-concept. Interest in self-processes has burgeoned in the past decade within many branches of psychology. Riding on the bandwagon of the cognitive revolution, self-theorists reconceptualized the self as a cognitive construction that is quite functional in bringing organization and meaning to one's experiences. In addition to psychologists' emphasis on self-concept, educators have become interested in the implications of self-concept among special populations within the school setting. Thus, this paper explores the common principles across these newer frameworks.

Keywords: Self-Concept, Adolescents, Special Education

INTRODUCTION

Self-concept has been studied for more than a century, as cited in Marsh and Craven, 2006). However, Interest in self-concept has recently escalated, in part, given increasing emphasis in its functional role in development. Although substantial scholarship of a theoretical and empirical nature has accumulated on the child's developing self-concept, scholars have not to any great extent examined the child's self-knowledge as a spontaneously occurring process-in-action (Chafel, 2003). Thus, far from being an epiphenomenon, self -- concept has taken center stage as a dynamic actor, playing a variety of roles (Harter, 1999). In fact, it is commonly asserted that the very architecture of self-concept theory, by evolutionary design, has been extremely functional across the life span (Harter, 1999).

Self -concept refers to self-evaluation or self-perception and it represents the sum of an individual's beliefs about his or her own identity attributes. A student's self -concept is dynamic and causality is complex (Hadley, Hair and Moore, 2008). That is, problems and difficulties can lower self- concept; but low self -concept can also cause problems). Having a negative self- concept has been associated with maladaptive behaviors and emotions and in contrast, having a positive self- concept has been linked to positive social and emotional development (Hadley, Hair and Moore, 2008). Marsh and Craven (2006) offered a comprehensive review of Marsh's model of reciprocal effects, which can be used to help resolve the chicken-and-the egg (Marsh and Craven, 2006) debate regarding self-concept and achievement.

For the most part, scholars have pursued their inquiries using traditional psychometric approaches (e.g. self-report techniques). Initial investigations into the development of self-concept have been largely descriptive and focused primarily on the content of self-representations, namely, how the Me-self evolves across childhood and adolescence (Harter, 1983b). Investigators sought to document developmental differences in self-representations through the coding of spontaneously generated descriptions of the self (Bannister and Agnew, 1977; Guardo and Bohan, 1971; McGuire, 1981; Montemayor and Eisen, 1977; Mullener and Laird, 1971; Rosenberg, 1979). These
efforts identified broad, discontinuous, qualitative shifts in how the self was described. However, there was little analysis of the structural organization of self-concepts. By comparison, less interest has been shown in examining the child's self-knowledge as a spontaneously occurring process-in-action (Chafel, 2003). It is possible that children construct knowledge of self naturalistically through play in classroom settings. Similarly, some understanding and some representation of the private, inner aspects of the self may well be universal, but many other aspects of the self may be quite specific to particular cultures. The self can be construed, framed, or conceptually represented in multiple ways. However, the exact content and structure of the inner self may differ considerably by culture.

**Review of Literature**

**Self-Concept -Cognitive Construction**

It has been widely accepted that one's self-concept is formed through interaction with one's environment and significant others (Mandelman, Tan, Kornilov, Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2010). However, it is suggested that an internal metacognitive component of self-concept is also critical to its development. Given that theorists (e.g., Epstein, 1973, 1981; Markus, 1980) began to forcefully argue that self-concept theory was a cognitive construction, an analysis of how cognitive-developmental shifts might be implicated in the age differences that had been documented thus represented the next conceptual approach. It was suggested (Harter, 1983b) that the broad developmental changes observed across early childhood, later childhood, and adolescence could be interpreted within a Piagetian framework. Thus, the finding that the young child described the self in terms of concrete, observable characteristics such as physical attributes, material possessions, behaviors and preferences that were not coherently organized was consistent with the cognitive abilities and limitations of the preoperational period (Harter, 1999). The earlier studies had reported that in middle to later childhood, the self was described in terms of trait like constructs (e.g., smart, honest, friendly, shy) that would require the type of hierarchical organizational skills to emerge during Piaget's period of concrete operations. For example, a trait label such as "smart" could be cognitively viewed as a higher-order generalization that subsumed the behavioral manifestations of scholastic, competence in several school subjects (e.g., doing well at reading, spelling and math). For the period of adolescence, earlier findings had documented the emergence of more abstract self definitions based on psychological processes such as inner thoughts, emotions, attitudes and motives. This type of self-portrait was consistent with the formal operational advances identified by Piaget, for example, the ability to construct higher-order abstractions and the capacity for introspection (Harter, 1999). However, it has become apparent that this broad, three-stage Piagetian analysis did not do justice to the complexity of self-concept development across childhood and adolescence.

Piagetian theory has painted a picture of cognitive development that was "too monolithic, universal, and endogenous" (Case, 1992). For example, findings documenting the tremendous unevenness or decalage in development across domains argued against some single, underlying set of developing cognitive structures (Costanzo, 1991; Graziano and Waschull, 1995). Moreover, the theory has been considered to be primarily descriptive, with insufficient attention to specific underlying processes and transition rules. The broad shifts that Piaget identified have also been viewed as too discontinuous. In addition, there has been little evidence on individual differences in the rate of cognitive development, or on the potential for different pathways of development. Finally issues involving contextual factors that might affect cognitive development were virtually ignored, for example, specific instructional and socialization experiences as well as broader cultural influences (Harter, 1999).

The development of self-concept is a central focus in the study of self-concept and interest in self-processes has burgeoned in the past few decades within many branches of psychology. Cognitive-developmentalists, particularly those of a neo-Piagetian persuasion, have addressed normative changes in the emergence of a self (e.g., Case, 1985, 1992; Fischer, 1980; Harter, 1997; Higgins, 1991). Developmentalists interested in memory processes have also described how the self is crafted through the construction of narratives that provide the basis for autobiographical memory (Fivush, 1987; Nelson, 1986, 1993; Snow, 1990). Theorists, building upon the earlier efforts of Ainsworth (1973, 1974) and Bowlby (1980), have provided new insights into how interactions with caregivers come to shape the representations of self and others that young children come to construct (Bretherton, 1991, 1992, Cassidy, 1990; Cicchetti, 1990, 1991; Cicchetti and Beeghly, 1990; Pipp, 1990; Sroufe, 1990). Clinicians with the psychodynamic tradition have also contributed to our understanding of how early socialization experiences come to shape the structure and content of self-evaluations and contribute to psychopathology (Blatt, 1995; Kemberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1965). Moreover, social and personality theorists have devoted considerable attention to those processes that produce individual differences in perceptions of self, particularly among adults (see Baumeister, 1987, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Kihlstrom, 1993; Markus and Woo, 1987; Steele, 1988).

Riding on the bandwagon of the cognitive revolution, self-theorists reconceptualized the self as a cognitive construction that is quite functional in bringing organization and meaning to one's experiences (Harter;
Self-Concept -Social Construction

Self-concept is constructed from social experiences in the family and at school. Study of self concept requires information not only on what the student thinks about him/herself, but also about the variables related to identity, the persons close to him/her and the effects of group membership on the construction of social identity (Cambra and Silvestre, 2003). Identity is conceptualized as a self-theory, a conceptual structure composed of self-representational and self- regulatory constructs (Berzonsky, 2004).

Such processes may be influenced by social and contextual factors. For example, the child's culture as well as the more proximal family and social milieu may play an important role in dictating what features of events and objects, including self-concept, are most salient and are therefore to be encoded (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). In fact, it may not be unreasonable to suppose, that in some cultures, on certain occasions, the individual, in the sense of a set of significant inner attributes of the person, may cease to be the primary unit of consciousness (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Instead, the sense of belongingness to a social relation may become so strong that it makes better sense to think of the relationship as the functional unit of conscious reflection (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Similarly, because a lower socioeconomic status may inspire unfavorable comparisons with those of a higher socioeconomic status, socioeconomic status and self-concept may be inversely related (Chafel, 2003). Moreover, the child's experience may also partially determine how particular structures are coordinated (Costanzo, 1991). The inclusion of contextual variables also contributes to an understanding of individual differences in the rate and manner in which structures are integrated. Although experience, instruction and practice may influence the rate of progression through cognitive levels, most acknowledge that there are factors that constrain the upper limit that one may achieve at any given age. For example, brain development, in general, and working memory capacity, in particular, may represent such constraints.

Similarly, in psychology, emotion is often viewed as a universal set of largely prewired internal processes of self-maintenance and self-regulation. This does not mean, though, that emotional experience is also universal. On the contrary, as suggested by Rosaldo (1984), Lutz (1988) and Solomon (1984) culture can play a central role in shaping emotional experience. As with cognition, if an emotional activity or reaction implicates the self, the outcomes of this activity will depend on the nature of the self-system. And apart from the fear induced by bright lights and loud noises, or the pleasure produced by a sweet taste, there are likely to be few emotions that do not directly implicate one's view of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). on the nature of the self-system.

In applying many of these principles to self-concept development, it is seen, for example, that a greater number of age-related levels can now be identified. Moreover, there has been more emphasis on how a given level of self-understanding builds upon the previous level. Processes through which concepts are combined to form categories or higher-order generalizations can be invoked to explain the developmental trajectory of self-concepts, as well as the tremendous individual differences that can be found at particular age levels (Harter, 1999). It is postulated that individuals have different identity processing styles and function as different types of self-theorists: information oriented problem solvers and decision makers; normative types who conform to the prescriptions of significant others; and diffuse-avoidant theorists who procrastinate and attempt to avoid dealing with identity-relevant conflicts (Berzonsky, 2004).

In addition to psychologists' emphasis on self-concepts, educators have become interested in the implications of self-concepts among special populations within the school setting (e.g., those identified as learning disabled and behaviorally disordered). In part, attention to self-concepts was heightened by federal legislation in 1975 mandating that children with educational handicaps receive public education in the least restrictive environment. There has been particular concern over whether the self-concepts of special education students are more negative in self-contained classrooms where they might be stigmatized or in...
mainstream classrooms where they might evaluate themselves more unfavourably in comparison to their normally achieving peers (Coleman, 1983, 1985; Kistner, Haskett, White, and Robbins, 1987; Renick and Harter, 1989; Silverman and Zigmond, 1983; Strang, Smith, and Rogers, 1978).

Most investigators have focused on general self-concept, anticipating that the difficulties and related failures of special education students would negatively affect their overall sense of personal self-concept. Positive overall self-concepts have been linked to various markers of positive development, including positive peer relationships and overall happiness (Hadley, Hair, and Moore, 2008). Implicit in this formulation is the assumption that success is valued by such students and that, therefore, their perceptions of their overall competence are critical determinants of their self-concept (Renick and Harter, 1989). However, these expectations have not, for the most part, been put to systematic, empirical tests. That is, investigators have not directly examined the processes through which special education students’ judgments about their overall worth are formed. Certain special education students may be able to maintain relatively high self-concept because they have more favorable evaluations in domains rated as important, can discount the importance of areas in which they have weaknesses, or both. As other investigators have observed, if special education students can dissociate their sense of self-concept from certain arenas and focus on other arenas, then self-concept should not suffer (Tollefson, 1982). However, these differences can be explained only partly as a function of the population studied. For example, in two separate studies of gifted students, scholastic competence and social acceptance demonstrated the strongest relationships to global self-concept in one study (Byrne and Schneider, 1988).

Given the heterogeneity among students identified as disabled, it has been important to examine the differences in specific classifications of disability. Specifically, some research findings indicate that individuals with physical disabilities tend to have lower self-concepts than their able-bodied counterparts (Gordon, 1965; Kapp-Simon, 1986; Lawrence and Winschel, 1973; Tam, 1991; Tam and Watkins, 1995). There may be several explanations for those findings. Physical disability often acts as a negative stimulus and leads to social discrimination. According to the perceptions of the general population, being physically disabled often means being stigmatized and placed in a disadvantaged social position. Culture-specific misattributions of the causes and effects of disabilities may exaggerate these unfavorable aspects, and the individuals with disabilities are predisposed to feel inferior to able-bodied persons (Tam, 1998).

In Tam’s (1995b) study, the participants with physical disabilities generally rated physical abilities as more salient than participants without disabilities did. Moreover, the participants with disabilities regarded meeting family responsibilities as one of the most important areas in their lives. However, the presence of unavoidable physical disabilities and less favorable employment status (Tam, 1988, 1995b) is likely to be a serious blow to the pride of those with physical disabilities and would probably strongly influence their overall self-concept.

Students with physical disabilities often experience constant disability-related environmental and social stresses (DeLoach, 1981) that may bar them from a satisfactory integration into the community. This constant lack of positive experience and lack of respect from others may lead to lower self-concept (Fists, 1972). Self-concept discrepancy is likely to be associated with painful emotional experiences, particularly when family scrutiny, social comparisons, and impersonal evaluations keep the discrepancy chronically in sight (Higgins, Klein, and Strauman, 1985).

**CONCLUSION**

Although it is indisputable that one’s self-perception is highly influenced by feedback from the environment and the opinions of parents, teachers and peers, there may be possible contributions of an individual’s internally generated view of self-specifically his or her metacognitive evaluations-to the development of his or her self-concept (Mandelman, Tan, Kornilov, Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2010). The review of research presented above indicates that there has been little research about the self-concepts of individuals with physical disabilities, although self-concept is a very important construct for understanding the psychology of that minority population. Recently, researchers have explored disability-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Those studies also have focused on the effects of sociocultural factors on health beliefs and attitudes toward people with a disability (Berry, 1994; Cook et al, 1994; Pande, 1994; Pande and Dalai, 1994). However, these studies are still preliminary, and their focus has been mainly on social beliefs and attitudes toward disability rather than on exploring the self-concepts of people with physical disabilities and the
implications for self-determination.

Practical Implications

As mentioned above, the factors that influence the formation of self-concept are multiple and interrelated, to such an extent that exhaustive description and differentiation is practically impossible. Educational conditions, such as teaching style, are important because they have a bearing on peer relations. Family factors, including culture, also have an influence on students' reactions and attitudes, which also condition interaction with others. Thus, helping improve self-concept is as varied as the influencing factors.

However, there are four strategies that teachers should consider when trying to improve students' self-concept. First, it is important to praise a student's accomplishments or successes by addressing the role that the student played in producing positive outcomes. Feedback is most effective when it addresses the role that the student played in producing positive outcomes. For example, rather than simply saying "It's great that you got a good grade on your paper," bring up the student's actions and abilities by saying "You worked so hard on the paper, and you really deserve the good grade that you got".

Second, it is important to praise a student's effort and improvement in skills. Students who focus on improving their skills gain self-concept through growth. In contrast, students who only focus on achievements base their self-concept solely on their successes and failures. Thus, it is important to praise efforts and improvement in skills in addition to the praise directed towards their accomplishments.

Third, it is important to refrain from negative comments or feedback. Praise and positive reinforcement are more effective in changing behavior and sustaining positive behavior. It is essential to describe and praise what the student should do, rather than what they should not do.

Fourth and final, it is important to work with students to improve skills in which he or she feels deficient. Specifically, it is important to first work with students to identify and discuss elements of tasks that show room for improvement. Then, it is important to provide the guidance, support and resources needed to accomplish the improvement. Strategies include helping students practice skills, giving them tips, or suggesting relevant workshops or programs to enhance skills.

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