

# Self-Concept and Self-Esteem.

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## Abstract.

An overview of the self-concept and its construction in children and adolescents is presented. The importance and educational implications of understanding the formation of the self concept, and in particular self-image and self-esteem, are also considered. The benefits of self-esteem enhancement on academic achievement, through parental and teacher influences (or indeed intervention programmes), are indicated.

## Introduction.

The individual's sense of themselves will involve an awareness of mental and physical attributes, as well as social roles. Such a self-awareness defines the self-image and, as will be discussed below, begins to develop at an early age. Simultaneous with the development of the self-image is the ideal-self, which is the individual's culmination of desirable characteristics, standards, behaviour and skills. The relative measure between self-image and the ideal-self reflects the individual's self-esteem. Self-esteem in turn may be displayed through the individual's confidence levels, overall contentment, and motivations for new experiences and challenges. In the context of education therefore, the student's construct of the self may have important implications on the learning experience. In the following sections, discussion on the components of the *self* will be given. How children and adolescents construct an overall sense of themselves as individuals will then be addressed, and the importance (educational implications) of an understanding of these processes for parents and teachers described.

## Who am I? An Overview

As mentioned above, the self-image is the individual's awareness of personal attributes. This is developed at an early age through the influences of the parents or guardians. For example, sex-role stereotyping by the parents, as well as feedback on or exaggeration of personal characteristics, may establish an early self-image and *body image* upon the child. The process continues in the school years through new experiences and the influences (i.e. perceived opinions) of *significant others*, such as peers and teachers. The self-image therefore can be deemed to develop through a "looking glass" (Cooley, 1902), which refers to image formation through feedback from others. However, the cognitive development of the individual will also enable reflection on experiences, and thus image formation as a response from the environment, and reflection on the environment; see Lawrence (1996).

The sum total of a person's perceived and desired mental and physical characteristics, as well as the person's perceived worthiness from these, is often referred to as the self-concept. Thus, self-concept can be viewed as an "umbrella" term (Lawrence, 1996) which encompasses the self-image, the ideal-self and the self-esteem of the individual. When an individual is asked to repetitively answer the question "who am I?", the individual is likely to first reveal the self-image, such as age and physical attributes, followed by aspects of the ideal-self and self-esteem, such as aspirations and perceived strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the self-concept can be viewed as an overall interpretation of "who am I?".

## Constructing I and Me.

In early childhood (i.e. pre-school), the child's self-image is likely to focus on specific observable behaviours and characteristics. That is, specific skills, possessions and preferences are likely to be stated by the child to describe the self, and perceived personal attributes directly related to behaviours. The child is unlikely to make reference to any relative evaluation of the self with respect to peers or society, which suggests that issues of an idealised self, and thus self-worth, are inconsequential to the child. However, there is some evidence which suggests that the child's self-esteem may in fact be particularly reflective of the parental perception of the child at this (and middle childhood) stages (Brookover et al. (1965)). Furthermore, uncritical (superficial) self-evaluation or self-doubt may further

result in the child to exhibit an inflated sense of abilities. Such characteristics of the child may be a reflection of the cognitive limitations at this stage of life (re a *pre-operational* stage (Piaget (1952))), and may in fact be beneficial in promoting, for example, an emotionally uninhibited approach to new experiences and challenges.

In middle childhood (i.e. pre-adolescence), a greater sense of social awareness arises, possibly through the wide increase of significant others (e.g. peers, teacher, and idols), as well as some internalisation of the perceived values and norms of society (see below). At this stage, statements of self-image will include emotionality, interpersonal references, as well as trait labels. Issues of self-esteem are thus likely to arise in middle childhood. As indicated earlier, the self-esteem or self-worth of the child refers to a relative measure between the child's self-image and ideal (or desired) self, i.e. in the words of James (1890), self-esteem can be considered as the ratio of "our actualities to our supposed potentialities". A low self-esteem therefore indicates a large discrepancy between the self-image and the ideal-self, and may be exhibited through several operations by the child (Lawrence (1996)):

- avoidance; i.e. a student with low self-esteem and an introvert temperament may adopt the attitude that "with no attempt there can be no failure"
- compensation; i.e. a student with low self-esteem and an extrovert temperament may exhibit boastful and arrogant behaviour to cover an underlying inferiority complex (Jung (1923))
- low motivation; i.e. although the discrepancy between self-image and the ideal-self may act as a motivator for personal development, if a student perceives a particular task as not relevant to their self-concept, then (as mentioned above) little motivation for the task may be exhibited
- resistance; i.e. the student will try to maintain the self-concept and resist change, even if this may be of benefit. Interestingly, students of low self-esteem are likely to offer the greatest resistance, so as to minimise risk.

The middle childhood individual will also begin to recognise the different components and domains in life which influence their view and evaluation of themselves. This leads to the emphasis of the notion of *situational* and *global* self-esteem. The former describes self-esteem for a particular task or situation (e.g. academic-related), whereas the latter the overall, or sum-total, self-esteem. Such differentiation of self-esteem has been used to explain why specific student inadequacy or incompetence is not necessarily reflected in the overall self-worthiness of the individual. Furthermore, if the specific task is not of significance to the student's ideal-self, irrespective of its teacher-perceived value, then motivation for the task itself will be low. For example, Lawrence (1996) describes cases of poor readers who actually have good linguistic and cognitive abilities in other tasks, but simply do not see reading as important to them.

In adolescence, self-views are generally observed to become more stable (Purkey (1970)). However, some of the evaluations of the self may be rather hypothetical (e.g. unobservable or abstract). There is also greater emphasis by the individual on the *psychological interior*, such that students will often make references to, for example, depression, moodiness and sensitivity. It is perhaps the pressures of academic pursuits, the cultural emphasis on success and assessment, and peer pressure and competition, that particularly facilitate self-concept and self-esteem development at this stage of life (Burns (1982)). Likewise, adolescents may be particularly susceptible to the influences of media and advertisement, as they endeavour to establish an identity (c.f. self-concept) of themselves. Role based abstractions also appear in adolescence, whereby the self-image of the individual is perceived contextually, i.e. a different self with different types of people (teachers, friends, parent). Such role based self-image has been explained by James (1890) through the distinction between "I", i.e. the self as *knower*, and the "me-self", i.e. the self (or selves) as known. In specific, the individual is postulated to create a me-self for every person (or group) he or she encounters.

What may possibly drive the creations of me-self, and why is it that very different and distinct me-selves arise in adolescence? It was mentioned earlier that in addition to the role of significant others, which constitute the individual's immediate environment, influences may arise through a conceptualised notion of societal values and norms, i.e. *generalised others* (Mead (1934)). Thus the generalised other involves inculcated notions (e.g. attitudes, expectations, points of view) of some abstract social class or group, which an individual will adopt as one's own. Although the formation of a

generalised other may have originally involved the specific attitudes of individuals, over time, the full complex of factors become inter-related and no longer reflect specific attitudes. It is perhaps through the influence of the generalised other that an individual may come to effectively interact within a group or society. Mead's theory therefore strongly emphasises the social influence on the development of an individual's self-concept, but in this case, there is perhaps reinforcement of the self-image through a perceived *looking-glass* which arises from generalised constructs. In a group sense therefore, the me-self may be viewed as a product of adoption (or perceived adoption) of a particular generalised other. However, perhaps a lack of adolescent experience, and thus possibly inaccurate or incomplete cognitive interpretation, may lead to some volatility and inconsistency amongst an individual's multiple selves (c.f. "conflict of the different mes" (James (1890)). With maturity, cognitive reasoning is believed to reduce the importance of social influences on the self-concept, and thus a greater consistency in character (see, for example, Harter (1993)). However, it is unlikely that an individual could ever be truly free of such influences (Reynolds (2001)).

### Educational Implications.

The social influences on the individual's sense of themselves, would suggest possible interventionist programmes for the improvement in, for example, self-esteem. In an educational context, the premise of such programmes have been that there is a relationship between student achievement and self-esteem, and that improvements in self-esteem will lead to improvements in achievement. Whilst research findings on this relationship are mixed, there is general agreement amongst researchers that students who are underachieving at school are also likely to have low self-esteem (Burns (1982)). However, the direction of causality has been of debate, i.e. is it low self-esteem which causes underachievement, or is it underachievement which causes low self-esteem? If the former case is true, then the parental and teacher roles (i.e. significant others) in student achievement are apparent. Likewise, on a wider context, the role of an educational institute itself, through, for example, the creation of a generalised other which defines its commitment and attitudes to education, must not be underestimated. In contrast, if low student self-esteem (academic or otherwise) is primarily an artefact of poor achievement, then perhaps assessment criteria, both in terms of appropriateness and methods of implementation, require re-evaluation (see also the discussions of Gardner (1999) on assessment based on *multiple intelligences*, rather than the linguistic and logical-mathematical bias expressed in typical Western schooling).

To date, the most convincing evidence for causality comes from research works which attempt to improve achievement by first improving self-esteem; see, for example Brookover et al. (1965), Lawrence (1996), and the review of Andrews (1998). Such workers demonstrate that indeed an improvement in student self-esteem can lead to improvements in academic achievements and / or interpersonal behaviour. However, Burns (1982) indicates that whilst academic success raises or maintains self-esteem, it is self-esteem which influences performance through, for example, higher expectations, standards and motivation. This, interdependency on self-esteem and achievement is also released through James' postulation that

$$\text{self esteem} = \text{success / pretensions}$$

which may be also stated as

$$\text{self esteem} = \text{achievement / expectations.}$$

Thus, high achievement may be realised through high expectations and high self-esteem, but as suggested by Burns, self-esteem itself may not be functionally independent of expectations. For example, students with a high specific self-esteem for a task, such as reading, may actually be underachieving in the task itself, which would suggest low expectations or standards for the task, and thus an inherent apathetic (low motivation) approach. Under these circumstances, perhaps a clearer distinction is needed between self-esteem and motivation. In particular, if consideration is given to the Yerkes-Dodson (1908) law of arousal and performance, then it is not too surprising to expect an optimum level of self-esteem for motivation. Thus, the optimal learning state is not necessarily one of low self-esteem, where issues of anxiety, resistance or avoidance may arise, or one of very high self-esteem, where issues of apathy and false-confidence may arise, but one of an optimal level of self-esteem. Such an optimum, of course, may be student and task specific, such that considerations need to be given to the student temperament (e.g. introvert-extrovert nature) as well as prior experience in related task areas.

It is also important to note that research evidence suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and achievement does not necessarily hold true for general (global) self-esteem (or indeed an overall academic self-esteem), but for self-esteem for very specific subjects such as reading, mathematics and science; see, for example, the discussions and research references of Huitt (1998). The implication here is that success in a particular subject or area does not need to involve a change in the student's self-concept or global self-esteem, but perhaps the student's expectation (or task-specific self-esteem) for future success. Interestingly, such a view has a some relation to the *expectancy-value* model for student learning (see, for, example, Biggs and Moore (1993). Nevertheless, for students of low overall self-esteem, who may, for example, be exhibiting behavioural problems, the benefits of task specific improvement of self-esteem may be considerable on the overall self-worth.

The above discussion on the research findings defining the inter-relationships between self-image and self-esteem lead to several implications for parents and teachers. For example, as significant others, and possible proponents of a generalised other, efforts are needed to recognise specific problems of low self-esteem in the child / adolescent, and to act effectively to negate low self-esteem; see, also the discussions of Rosenberg (1965, 1979), Coopersmith (1967), and Andrews and Brown (1988, 1993) on the parental influences on self-esteem. The works of Carl Rogers (1961) may be particularly relevant here, whereby specific qualities of the teacher or parent are indicated to benefit student self-esteem, e.g. non-judgemental acceptance of the child, genuineness, and empathy. These qualities are likely to lead to a trusting and communicative environment for learning and development.

The social nature of the self-concept suggests group activities may also be particularly beneficial for enhancing self-esteem, as has been demonstrated by Lawrence (1996). For example, such activities may lead to the student to experience positive feedback from peers, and thus a possible means of reassessing a poorly perceived self-image (e.g. "circle-time" and "recalling the good times" activities). Certain activities could also provide students with opportunities to take risks, and thus challenge any existing avoidance or resistance traits (e.g. "playing the hero or expert" activities). The specific nature of activities could, of course, be adapted to suit the age group of concern.

Finally, in order establish a positive ethos in the classroom and home (c.f. a favourable generalised other), the self-esteem of the teacher and parents are also of importance (Burns (1975)). Indeed, the qualities underlying good counselling skills are more likely to be identified with high self-esteem. One implication here is that the education community as a whole has a responsibility in providing teachers with a favourable working environment, and opportunities for personal growth, if indeed this is to be favourably reflected in student achievement.

### Conclusions.

An overview of how children and adolescents construct a sense of themselves as individuals has been presented. This considered aspects of the self-image, self-esteem and self-concept. Factors influencing self-esteem and the self-concept have been shown to comprise of social and cognitive issues, the former being deemed to be most significant. The social influence on the self-concept, as well as research findings which indicate a relationship between specific self-esteem and achievement, suggest that school-based intervention programmes may be beneficial in improving the academic performance of students of low self-esteem. Likewise, the role of the parents in the individual's educational development must not be undervalued.

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