

10 A STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS IN SELF DESCRIPTIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is widely recognized as a stage associated with substantial change in the self. The changes that take place during adolescence bring about a major shift in personal development. Erikson (1968) and Blos (1979) recognize adolescence as a major life stage for identity formation. The construction of the self in adolescence has been reviewed in many studies done in the west. Numerous studies of the self-descriptions of children and adolescents growing up in western contexts suggest that the developing self-concept becomes more abstract and trait-like as children get older. As we are now in the 21st century with an exposure to the whole world and are faced with a war situation in the country, the adolescents' self-construals would be more apt to provide information about aspects of self-knowledge and also to identify their perceptions of others.

THE BACKGROUND

The basic motivation for this study was the desire on the part of the researcher to probe the perceptions of others in spontaneous self-descriptions of adolescents. Erikson (1968), Papini (1994), Kaye and Warren (1988) have viewed the process of adolescent identity formation as being closely related to social living. These studies and a number of other studies on significant other in adolescents' lives Murray and Holmes (1993, 1994), Anderson et. al. (1996, 1997), Simmons, Rosenberg & Resenberg (1973), Niles (1998), McGuire & McGuire (1998), Kuebli, Reddy & Gibbons (1998) influenced the researcher in designing the present study.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study were to identify references to others in the self-descriptions of adolescents, to identify the functions served by adolescents' references to others in their self-descriptions, to find out the person-identity of adolescents' references to others and to see whether gender and age cause differences in perceptions of others in their self-descriptions. The kind of information that was conveyed by the child's reference to others was identified as functions and the references to others with nouns, proper nouns and pronouns etc. were grouped under person-identity in this study.

RATIONALE

The majority of the student population in our schools are in their adolescence. A good understanding of adolescents is very important if successful teaching/learning is to take place. Many researches have been done in other countries on adolescent identity formation and their significant – other representations in social perception. Very few researches have been done in Sri Lanka related to self-concept development. As the researcher could not find a single study done on perceptions of others in self-descriptions of adolescents in Sri Lanka, it was decided to carry out this study.

THE SAMPLE

The sample for this study consisted of 86 students (45 girls and 41 boys) in Grade 7 and 9 in a government mixed school in the Sri Jayawardenapura zone of Colombo.

The school was selected using the researchers prior knowledge about the school. It is a government mixed 1AB school and the students are from different socio-economic levels. The researcher, therefore, expected the sample to be representative of the student population of the secondary schools in Sri Jayawardenapura Zone.

From the Grade 7 and 9 classes, two classes were randomly selected for the study. All the students present in these two classes were included in the sample.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research methodology was used. Out of the techniques in qualitative research, Document Analysis technique was used to collect data. An open-ended question, "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" was given to the students in the sample. Spontaneous written responses were collected after 20 minutes. All the students in the sample had responded.

Students' self-descriptions were examined for references to others. Each reference was coded twice, first for its function, and then for the identity of the individual who was mentioned. Function referred to the kind of information that was conveyed by the student's reference to other. Eleven person identity categories and eight function categories were identified.

RESULTS :

Analysis of Data

The data obtained using the students' written responses to the question "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" were analyzed. Analysis began with examination of the frequency of children's overall references to others. The students overall made a total of 474 references to others when asked to write self-descriptions. The functions served by children's mention of other in their self-descriptions and the identity of others mentioned were also analyzed. Frequency of person-identity of references to other under each category were counted and percentage of references were calculated for the total sample and for gender and age differences.

Similarly, functions of children's reference were counted and the percentages were calculated.

Data interpretation, Findings

Adolescents in the sample made a total of 474 references to others when asked to write self-descriptions. Out of the 11 person-identity categories, mother, father, brother, sister and friends received over 75% of all references to others. Non parental adults too were mentioned with a fair percentage (7.38%) by the total sample. Gender differences were not apparent for these categories except for 'brother' and 'non parent' adults'.

Out of the eight function categories, 57.82% of all references were descriptions of others. Gender similarities in the functions of adolescents' references to others were more apparent than gender differences. However, boys had descriptions of others more often than girls, while girls made more allocentric references.

No marked difference was seen in functions between the two age groups except for a few categories. 11 - 12 year olds had more allocentric references than 13 - 14 year olds. Family role was also mentioned more often by 11 - 12 year olds than 13 - 14 years olds.

The major findings to emerge from this study was that the adolescents tend to make references to others when describing themselves. Relations with parents, siblings and non parental adults etc. seemed more salient to the adolescents in the sample, depicting their preference to a collectivistic culture.

Implications :

As seen from the findings of this study, becoming a significant other in a child's life is not simply a matter of assuming the role. One is either a significant other or one is not. To the child, the image reflected by the significant other always has impact.

One is particularly likely to make use of feedback from other individuals who are especially important to him. If the image reflected by the significant other is positive it becomes a prime source of positive self-concept development.

Hence teachers feedback on students' work and their attitude towards students would have a great impact on students' self-concept development.