Analysing evidence in light of Rosenberg's findings of a developmental shift in children's self-descriptions from physical towards psychological aspects.

by Patricia Karsten

Abstract

The research addressed the question of a developmental trend in children's self-descriptions from physical and observable aspects towards more relational and private, inner world aspects, as suggested by Rosenberg (1979) and Harter (1983).

The research compared two semi-structured interviews that had been gained in a replication of Rosenberg's study. The participants were asked to write down self-descriptive statements which were then discussed with the interviewer, along with other questions regarding children's categorical self and the locus of self-knowledge. Children's responses were categorized into 'physical', 'character', 'relational', and 'inner' descriptions.

Results for written and verbal statements differed and did not provide clear evidence for the predicted developmental trends. This might have been due to methodological difficulties or confounding variables. Further research that takes aspects of gender development and consumption into account may provide insights.

Introduction

The research addresses the general question of the development of children's understanding of self and builds on previous works of Bannister and Agnew (1977), Rosenberg (1979) and Harter (1983). Based on Bannister and Agnew's research, Rosenberg further explored the development of children's self-concept. He was interested in four aspects of children's categorical self, i.e. how they placed themselves into descriptive categories: How they generally described themselves (self-description), what they perceived as their strengths and weaknesses (self-evaluation), how they saw themselves in relation to others (self and others), and into what person they would like to develop (ideal self). He was also interested in the 'locus of self-knowledge', i.e. who children believed knows them best.

Rosenberg developed a set of categories to classify children's self-descriptive statements. His findings supported the thesis of a developmental shift from physical, observable features towards more inner, psycholgical aspects in children's self-descriptions. Children's perceived locus of self-knowledge was reported to move from others, usually parents, to themselves, thus paralleling the shift in the self-descriptions. Based on this research and others, Harter put forward the idea of a developmental sequence in children's self-descriptions, corresponding to Rosenberg's categories and resembling Piaget's cognitive stages of development (Oates, Sheehy and Wood 2005).

This research analyses two interviews out of several that had been gained in a replication of Rosenberg's study (The Open University 2008), and applied an adapted set of Rosenberg's categories, in order to find out if the evidence supported the hypothesized shift with age from physical, observable features and character traits towards relational aspects and self-reflections,

and the shift in the locus of self-knowledge from others to self. It was the question if Rosenberg's findings, which were almost 30 years old, were supported by today's evidence. The development of children's self perception might follow principles that are stable over time. On the other hand, children's changing lifestyles or other factors might be responsible for contradictory results and point to possible areas for future research.

Method

Design

The research was non-experimental and based on semi-structured interviews of children that had been made by a Open University research team. The design was an adaptation of Rosenberg's above-cited study and consisted in the comparison of children's self-descriptive statements that had been elicited during the interviews.

Sample

For the interviews, children in the age groups 8 and 16 from a primary and a secondary school in the Milton Keynes Area, Great Britain had been selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. Parent's written consent was a precondition for children's participation. In order to comply with BPS principles (BPS 2008), children were explicitly informed that they could stop the interview and the recording at any time.

For the research, one interview in each age group was selected. The first interview was that of Annie, an 8 year old girl, the second that of Adam, a 16 year old boy.

Materials

The research was conducted by analysing the written transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews (The Open University 2006).

Procedure

The interviewer first explained the procedure to the child and the possibility to interrupt at any time. The interview began by soliciting the child to write down a list of self-descriptive statements that answered the question 'Who am I', beginning with the word 'I …'. These statements were discussed afterwards. The discussion then proceeded to questions about the children's strength and weaknesses (self-evaluation), in what ways they perceived themselves as similar or different to others (self and others), the person they would like to become (ideal self), and whom they thought knew them best, they themselves or somebody else (locus of self-knowledge). The interviews were about 30 minutes of length. There were two other persons present, and occasional interruptions were made for technical reasons or if daytime noises were disturbing.

Children's written self-descriptions were analysed quantitatively by categorizing them into an adapted set of Rosenberg's categories and calculating the percentages of statements in each category. The categories were

- Physical: observable facts like physical attributes, preferences or activities

- Character traits: children's generalizations about their inner qualities
- Relationships: children's generalizations about their interpersonal character traits
- Inner: children's self-reflections about their character traits, emotions, wishes or goals

Children's verbal responses to interview questions were analyzed qualitatively through discourse analysis. Those statements that contained aspects that directly addressed the question were selected and categorized.

Results

Children's written statements were categorized without modifications, under the assumption that the children intended them as unitary self-descriptions. Annie's written statements contained self-descriptions along physical aspects and character traits, they lacked relational aspects and inner world reflections. Adam's written statements were predominantly concerned with physical aspects and inner world reflections, while character traits and relational aspects were much less frequent.

In the discussion regarding self-evaluation, Annie's responses concentrated on physical aspects for the weak points, and on her relations to others for the best things. Adam's responses are about his relations to others for both best and weak points, and his discourse includes reflection about the circumstances and his feelings in those relations.

When asked about similarities and differences to other persons, Annie focused on physical aspects and described activities and preferences, whereas Adam talked about inner aspects like similar or different viewpoints and his higher-than-average ambitions.

In their responses to questions about their ideal self, Annie focused on physical, observable aspects like future profession and being busy, but also on relational aspects when she referred to assuming adult responsibilities and having kids. Adam's answers concentrated on inner reflections, on his belief in his personality as a leader, but also on relational aspects, as he expressed the wish to change something in other people's lives.

Annie saw the locus of self-knowledge predominantly with her mother, when asked about school performance and home behaviour, but was conscious about her private knowledge regarding her day-to-day performance in maths. Adam pointed to his mother when asked who knew best about his general school performance and home behaviour, but mentioned his private knowledge about smoking and drug-taking among youths, and lack of recognition for his household contributions. Regarding generosity as a character trait, he considered himself to know best if it applied to him or not.

Table 1: Comparison of Annie's and Adam's self descriptions in written statements*

Category	Annie (5 statements)	Adam (9 statements)
Physical	40.0	44.4
Character	60.0	11.1
Relation	0	11.1
Inner	0	33.3

* The values are given as percentage of all statements. Percentage for Adam includes a rounding error

Table 2: Summary of results from discourse analysis (discussion) *

	Annie				Adam			
Aspect of self	**P**	**C**	**R**	**I**	**P**	**C**	**R**	**I**
Self-evaluation	x		x				x	x
Self and others	x							x
Ideal self / vision for the future	x		x				x	x

* Discussion on locus of self-knowledge is not included as the categorizations were not applicable

Table 3: Locus of self-knowledge – who knows them best (discussion)

	Annie		Adam	
Aspects of self	**others**	**self**	**others**	**self**
school performance	x	x	x	x
home behaviour	x		x	x
generosity *	-	-		x

* Annie had not been asked the question about generosity

Discussion

Quantitative analysis of Annie's and Adam's written self-descriptions only partially supported the notion of a developmental sequence along Rosenberg's and Harter's propositions. For Annie, they confirmed the predicted predominance of physical and character traits in her self-descriptions. Adam's self-descriptions showed the tendency towards inner self reflections, but they relied strongly on physical, observable aspects, while relational aspects appeared less often than predicted. So the evidence rather supported the idea of a shift with age from character descriptions to inner self reflections, while maintaining interest in physical, observable aspects of self.

The qualitative analysis of children's responses modified these findings in a contradictory way. Annie's tendency to focus on physical, observable aspects was confirmed, but character traits played a lesser and relational aspects a more important role in her self-descriptions than would have been predicted for her age group. Adam's responses revealed much concern about his relation to others which had not been evident in his written statements, for example when he related his bad performance at school to his wish to be accepted by new friends. The discussion further confirmed the predominance of self-reflections which was already apparent in Adam's written statements. So children's verbal responses provided evidence for a shift of interest with age from physical, observable aspects towards self-reflective inner aspects. Unexpectedly, character traits seemed to be playing no role in the responses regarding self-evaluation, relation to others and ideal self, while relational aspects seemed to be relevant irrespective of age. Regarding the locus of self-knowledge, there was some evidence for the predicted shift from others to self, as Adam's responses reflected slightly more confidence in his own perceptions than Annie's, but different interview questions lead to comparability problems.

Any generalization from these findings should be undertaken with great caution, because they would rely only on two arbitrarily selected interviews. The calculated percentages can be used to

compare the relative importance of the types of statements between Annie and Adam, but they do not contain the same amount of information as percentages calculated over a large sample of interviews. Therefore, the results do not necessarily question the validity of Rosenberg's findings, but they might point to areas for further research.

An important aspect to consider when interpreting the findings was the difficulty to categorize children's written and verbal statements. Some statements seemed to fit in more than one category, depending on the researchers interpretation of what the children primarily intended to express. For example, Adam's statement that he liked to go shopping with his friends contained a generalization about his preferred activities, about his character, and at the same time was concerned with his relation to others. As the quantitative analysis was based on very few written statements, the results were highly sensitive to changes in categorization. These factors accounted for a possible lack in reliability and consequently in validity of the results.

The qualitative analysis of children's responses in the discussion suffered from the subjectivity problem associated with interpreting children's statements through discourse analysis. For example, in his responses to questions regarding self and others, the notion of Adam's higher-than-average ambitions for his life was an interpretation of his statements about not wanting to pass his life working in a shop like many of his friends did, which was then qualified as self-reflection (category 'inner').

But discourse analysis was able to reveal aspects that originally had not been included in the research question. In the discussion, Annie was very confident about her strengths in Maths, mentioned playing football and categorized herself as 'tomboy'. This is in line with findings of gender research about a relative flexibility in girl's attitudes towards male/female behaviours (Banerjee 2005). Similarly, the discussion revealed Adam's strong interest in fashion, pointing to the importance of brand clothes for children's developing personalities which had been confirmed by research in children's consumption behaviour (Phoenix 2005). It might be interesting to further analyse the influence of gender and consumption attitudes on the way children's self-description develop.

Based on these findings, future research might include a greater number of interviews and modify the applied methods. Measures to assure inter-observer reliability of results are needed to address the difficulties in categorizing children's statements. More than two age groups would allow to further investigate stage-like development patterns paralleling Piaget's cognitive stages, or Kohlberg's stages in gender development (Kohlberg 1966). In order to gain a broader basis for quantification of results and to increase the validity of interpretations along discourse analysis, children's discussion responses might be summarized into self-descriptive statements and verified with the participants. A modified set of categories might help to capture effects of gender and consumption attitudes in children's self-descriptions and increase the ecological validity of results. Further research might address the question of similar developmental patterns across cultures.

Conclusion

The research results only partially support the hypothesis of developmental stages in children's self descriptions along Rosenberg's set of categorizations. It is suggested to undertake further research and apply methodological adaptations that specifically take into account the influence of gender and consumption on children's development of self.

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Appendix

I : Self-description category analysis forms

	P	C	R	I	Participant: Annie	Age: 8	Sex: F
I-statements from the written record							
1	x				I like doing Harry Potter Lego		
2	x				I love rabbits, guinea pigs and dogs		
3		x			I think one of my hobbies is using the TV remote control		
4		x			I'm really good at Maths but get stuck on telling the time		
5		x			I'm not very good at remembering		
	2	3	0	0	Column totals	Overall total: 5	
	20.0	30.0	0.0	0.0	Percentages (column total / overall total x 100)		

	P	C	R	I	Participant: Adam	Age: 16	Sex: M
I-statements from the written record							
1		x			I'm a very sporty person and love playing and watching football.		
2				x	I have high ambitions for my life and I'd like to become a politician or a football coach		
3	x				I work part-time at a shop called Base.		
4			x		I like to go shopping with my friends when I get spare time		
5	x				I support Newcastle United		
6	x				I have five dogs which compete at dog shows across the country.		
7	x				[I] enjoy PE [Physical education] and humanities at school.		
8				x	I'd like to think I'm smart.		
9				x	I'm worried about my GCSEs as they affect my future		
	4	1	1	3	Column totals	Overall total: 9	
	44.4	11.1	11.1	33.3	Percentages (column total / overall total x 100)		

II: Children's responses to interview questions

Question 1: Self-evaluation (best points and weak points)

P	C	R	I	Participant: Annie	Age: 8	Sex: F
	x			I just like being myself		
x				I like doing loads of different things [Maths, stagecoach acting, singing and dancing]		
		x		I've got lots of friends		
		x		We're all friendly		
		x		We normally like playing games all together		
x				My ears are a weak point		
x				My legs because I don't like, because I don't have enough exercise		

P	C	R	I	Participant: Adam	Age: 16	Sex: M
		x		I'm approachable by everyone		
		x		I like to talk to people		
	x			I really like to have fun		
	x			… my personality like just being a relaxed person		
			x	everyone go 'Oh, he's such a nice lad,' and stuff, and that makes me really feel, you know, like special in a way that people see me like that		
			x	I like to think that I know what I'm doing most of the time		

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P	C	R	I	
			x	I've got clear goals and stuff. But it's a bit shaky at the moment
			x	[new friends at school] see me as a relaxed person now more than a workaholic that I should be
			x	… my mum's friend has gone into the hospital recently.. I'm quite weak .. coping with that sort of situation

Question 2: Self and others (similarities and differences with peers)

P	C	R	I	Participant: Annie	Age: 8	Sex: F
x				[my sister] likes being in her room and all cramped up and that. I like to be playing downstairs		
x				[my sister and I] both like reading books		
x				I'm the same as Naomi because we both like maths and .. [we are] farther than everyone else and farther than we should be		
x				I'm the same as Georgina because we're both tomboy and we love football		
x				I'm the same as Emmie because we love Scooby-Dogs		
x				… and [I'm the same as] Megan, because she likes Harry Potter as well		
x				I think I'm different to Christie because she doesn't like doing Maths.		

P	C	R	I	Participant: Adam	Age: 16	Sex: M
			x	with my friends… we've more or less got the same viewpoints		
			x	I'd like to think I'd get on with anyone that didn't have, like, too much of an extreme different point of view		
			x	I like to think that I'm not going to spend the rest of my life working in a shop like some of my friends, and …I just think that, you know, I could do something extra special		
			x	got a friend who moved from Zimbabwe and actually like learning about his culture a bit, which is quite interesting, just to see how different things are.		

Question 3: Ideal self (vision for future)

P	C	R	I	Participant: Annie	Age: 8	Sex: F
x				I'd like to actually be an actress		
x				and if that doesn't work maybe … and archaeologist		
	x			Because I like finding things from the past		
x				I'll have kids to look after		
x				I'll have a job, I'll have to pay the bills and get holidays and all that		
x				I think I'll probably be the archeologist		
	x			I like doing about the past and I like acting but I like doing, finding things from the past because past's better.		

P	C	R	I	Participant: Adam	Age: 16	Sex: M
			x	I'd be like a leader, like a leader or something with power, because I like to think that I'd been really strong as a leader		