The Development of Self-Conceptions from Childhood to Adolescence

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Self-concept development from childhood to adolescence was studied from a cognitive-structural perspective. The responses of subjects to the question "Who am I?" were analyzed by means of a 30-category scoring system. Between childhood and adolescence, there was a significant increase in self-conceptions categorized as follows: occupational role; existential, individuating; ideological and belief references; the sense of self-determination; the sense of unity; interpersonal style; and psychic style. A decrease occurred for self-conceptions based on territoriality, citizenship; possessions, resources; and physical self, body image. Curvilinear age changes were found for the use of the categories sex; name; kinship role; membership in an abstract category; and judgments, tastes, likes. The results for self-concept development were in general agreement with Werner's notion that cognitive development proceeds from a concrete to an abstract mode of representation.

Traditional approaches to the study of self-concept development between childhood and adolescence have been primarily based on either role theory (Elder, 1968) or a psychodynamic perspective (Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1969). The focus of these theoretical orientations is on possible ontogenetic changes in traits, dispositions, or motivational states (Carlson, 1965; Engel, 1959; Monge, 1973) and on identifying age changes in the factor organization of traits applicable to the self (Kokenes, 1974).

One aspect of self-concept development previously neglected concerns possible structural changes in the types of constructs used to describe oneself. Both Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and Werner (1961) have argued that an individual's cognitions about the physical world undergo important qualitative changes between childhood and adolescence. In particular, Werner's "orthogenetic principle" states that "whenever development occurs, it proceeds from a state of relative globality and lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchic integration" (Werner, 1957, p. 126). Werner's principle suggests that as an individual matures, his cognitions about the physical world undergo a shift from a concrete to an abstract mode of representation.

The orthogenetic principle, although not specifically concerned with ontogenetic changes in social cognition, has been fruitfully extended by Crockett (1965) to the area of the development of person perception. According to Crockett, an individual's developing ability to think abstractly allows him to differentiate between another person's appearance or behavior and his underlying dispositional qualities. Scarlett, Press,
and Crockett (1971) found that with increasing age, children use a greater number of constructs to describe their peers and that the proportion of egocentric and concrete descriptions declines while the proportion of nonegocentric and abstract descriptions increases. More recently, Bigner (1974) found similar developmental changes to occur between kindergarten and the eighth grade in children's descriptions of their siblings. In general, research on the development of person perception suggests that with increasing age, other people are viewed in a more interpersonal, complex and abstract manner (Peever & Secord, 1973; Hill & Palmquist, Note 1).

The results of these studies demonstrate the utility of applying a cognitive-structural approach to the issue of the development of person perception and suggest that such an approach may be advantageously applied to the development of other aspects of social cognition, such as self-conceptions. As a general statement about development, the orthogenetic principle suggests that an individual's increasing ability to think abstractly not only results in the greater use of psychological and abstract constructs to describe others but also a correspondingly greater use of these types of constructs to describe the self. In addition, social psychologists consider the knowledge that an individual acquires about himself and about others to be the result of social interaction (Mead, 1934). For these two reasons, self-concept development may show a sequence of development that parallels the sequence found for the development of person perception.

The purpose of this study is to extend the cognitive-structural perspective to the area of self-concept development. Based upon this orientation, it is hypothesized that young children primarily conceive of and describe themselves in terms of such concrete characteristics as their physical appearance and possessions, while adolescents conceive of themselves more abstractly and describe themselves in more psychological and interpersonal terms. In addition, data collected by Mullener and Laird (1971) suggest that between the ages of 12 and 29 years self-evaluations become increasingly more differentiated and less global. A similar trend may also occur for self-concept development between childhood and adolescence and may be reflected in the adolescent's use of a greater variety of constructs to describe himself.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 136 males and 126 females drawn from four schools in a suburban, midwestern, university community. Approximately equal numbers of males and females from Grades 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 completed the test instrument. The mean ages in years for students in each respective grade were 9.8, 11.8, 14.0, 15.9, and 17.9. The students were almost exclusively white and within an average and above average range of intelligence as indicated by academic performance and teacher evaluation. Almost all of the parents were in professional, entrepreneurial, or upper white-collar classes—Classes I and II according to Hollingshead's (Note 2) two-factor index of social position.

Procedure

Students were administered the Twenty Statements Test (Burgental & Zelen, 1950; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) in class groups. Students were given a test form with 20 spaces and were asked to write 20 different answers to the question "Who am I?"

Scoring System

A 30-category scoring system developed by Gordon (1968) was used to classify each answer. Each answer was assigned to the one category that was judged to most accurately reflect the meaning of the response. The system was designed to capture the major varieties of self-representations and the categories are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The 30 categories are listed in Table 1.

Two undergraduates were trained in the use of the scoring system. Interjudge agreement was tested by having both coders independently score a random sample of 20 tests drawn from the original sample. These students' data were not part of the final analysis. Responses assigned to the same category by both coders were scored as agreed. Interjudge agreement was 85% (mean agreement per test, 17 out of 20 responses).

Results

The data were summarized in terms of the percentage of students who used each category at least once. Since the sample size was large, and many chi-square tests were performed, only $p$ values less than .001 were
considered reliable. With the age factor collapsed, chi-square tests for sex differences were computed for each category. No reliable differences were observed and the data for both sexes were combined for all subsequent analyses (N = 262). Statistically reliable age changes in self-conceptions were found for 15 of the 30 categories. Table 1 shows the percentage of students at each age using a particular category at least once.

There were significant increases between childhood and adolescence in the percentage of subjects who used the following seven categories: occupational role (e.g., hoping to become a doctor, paper-boy), χ²(4) = 26.13; existential, individuating (e.g., me, I, myself), χ²(4) = 38.24; ideological and belief references (e.g., a liberal, a pacifist), χ²(4) = 19.10; sense of self-determination (e.g., ambitious, a hardworker), χ²(4) = 41.63; sense of unity (e.g., in harmony, mixed-up), χ²(4) = 20.38; interpersonal style (how I typically act, e.g., friendly, fair, shy), χ²(4) = 48.44; and psychic style (how I typically think and feel, e.g., happy, calm), χ²(4) = 45.30. Adolescents were more likely than children to refer to themselves with terms that were future oriented, abstract, interpersonal, and psychological.

There were significant decreases between childhood and adolescence in the percentage of subjects who used the following three categories: territorially, citizenship (e.g., an American, living on Oak Street), χ²(4) = 27.95; possessions resources (e.g., own a dog, have a bike), χ²(4) = 33.72; and physical self, body image (e.g., 5'10", fat), χ²(4) = 48.13. These categories generally indicate a concrete description of one's address, material possessions, and physical self, such as height or weight.

Finally, there were significant curvilinear
age changes in the percentage of subjects who used the following five categories: sex (e.g., a girl, a guy), $\chi^2 (4) = 19.62$; name (e.g., Shirley), $\chi^2 (4) = 44.89$; kinship role (e.g., a son, a sister), $\chi^2 (4) = 18.53$; membership in an abstract category (e.g., a person, a human, a speck in the universe), $\chi^2 (4) = 69.41$; and judgments, tastes, likes (e.g., hate school, like sports), $\chi^2 (4) = 30.53$.

One’s sex, name, and kinship status are concrete, objective aspects of the self, and the use of terms referring to these characteristics produced U-shaped developmental functions. The abstract designation of oneself as “a person” or “a human” reached a surprising peak at age 12, declined at age 14, and steadily increased from age 14 onward. Evaluation of one’s activities, such as “like to play baseball” and “hate to clean my room,” were classified judgments, tastes, likes. These responses contain both concrete and abstract aspects, and their use increased until age 14 and declined thereafter.

The mean number of categories used at least once by students at each age was as follows: 8.6, 9.0, 9.1, 9.5, and 11.1; $F(4, 257) = 3.86$, ns. Although adolescents used more categories than children in describing themselves, the difference was not significant.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support the general hypothesis that with increasing age an individual’s self-concept becomes more abstract and less concrete. The children in this study primarily describe themselves in terms of concrete, objective categories such as their address, physical appearance, possessions, and play activities, while adolescents used more abstract and subjective descriptions such as personal beliefs, motivational and interpersonal characteristics. These overall findings are in general agreement with data from studies of the development of social cognitions (Hill & Palmquist, Note 1). The data from the present investigation are also similar to data obtained by Livesley and Bromley (1973) who studied self-concept development among English school children and who used a different scoring system.

The concrete–abstract change is not a simple linear one, however, since additional findings suggest that curvilinear changes occur in the use of categories that could be considered either concrete or abstract. These changes primarily involve the use of concrete description by adolescents rather than the use of abstract descriptions by children. For example, many adolescents referred to concrete characteristics such as their sex and name when describing themselves, suggesting that this type of information has an important phenomenological meaning even to individuals who characteristically define themselves in more abstract terms. Alternatively, few young children described themselves in abstract terms with the exception of the many 12-year-olds who referred to themselves as “a person” or “a human,” abstract ideas which may reflect the initial appearance of advanced cognitive skills.

The presentation of a few protocols may provide a more vivid picture of self-concept change in children and adolescents. The following examples were chosen to represent typical self-descriptions at different ages. The original spellings and emphases have been retained.

The first set of responses are from a 9-year-old boy in the fourth grade. Note the concrete flavor of his self-descriptions and the almost exclusive use of terms referring to his sex, age, name, territory, likes, and physical self:

My name is Bruce C. I have brown eyes. I have brown hair. I have brown eyebrows. I’m nine years old. I LOVE! Sports. I have seven people in my family. I have great! eye site. I have lots! of friends. I live on 1923 Pinecrest Dr. I'm going on 10 in September. I'm a boy. I have an uncle that is almost 7 feet tall. My school is Pinecrest. My teacher is Mrs. V. I play Hockey! I am almost the smartest boy in the class. I LOVE! food. I love fresh air. I LOVE School.

The next protocol is from a girl aged 11½ in the sixth grade. Although she frequently refers to her likes, she also emphasizes her interpersonal and personality characteristics.

My name is A. I’m a human being. I’m a girl. I’m a truthful person. I’m not pretty. I do so-so in my studies. I’m a very good cellist. I’m a very good pianist. I’m a
little bit tall for my age. I like several boys. I like several girls. I’m old-fashioned. I play tennis. I am a very good swimmer. I try to be helpful. I’m always ready to be friends with anybody. Mostly I’m good, but I lose my temper. I’m not well-liked by some girls and boys. I don’t know if I’m liked by boys or not.

The final example is from a 17-year-old girl in the twelfth grade. Note the strong emphasis on interpersonal description, characteristic mood states, and the large number of ideological and belief references.

I am a human being. I am a girl. I am an individual. I don’t know who I am. I am a Pisces. I am a moody person. I am an indecisive person. I am an ambitious person. I am a very curious person. I am not an individual. I am a loner. I am an American (God help me). I am a Democrat. I am a liberal person. I am a radical. I am a conservative. I am a pseudoliberal. I am an atheist. I am not a classifiable person (i.e., I don’t want to be).

One notes in these examples and in the protocols from our other subjects a developmental increase in the depth and vividness of self-conceptions. Children describe where they live, what they look like, and what they do. Their self-concept seems somewhat shallow and undifferentiated, both from other people and from their environment. Adolescents, however, describe themselves in terms of their beliefs and personality characteristics, qualities which are more essential and intrinsic to the self and which produce a picture of the self that is sharp and unique.

Self-concept development is not an additive process. Adolescents do not simply add more complex and abstract ideas about themselves to their earlier, childish, concrete conceptions. In comparison to children, adolescents conceive of themselves quite differently; earlier notions either drop out or are integrated into a more complex picture.

Self-conceptions appear to undergo a developmental transformation, perhaps based on the developing ability of the individual to draw inferences and form hypotheses about underlying characteristics. It is not uncommon, for example, for a young child to say that he likes to play baseball, football, hockey, and so on. An adolescent rarely responds in this way. A much more common response would be for him to say, “I am an athlete” or “I like athletics.” Adolescents seem to infer from their own behaviors the existence of underlying abilities, motives and a personality style. As Inhelder and Piaget (1958) point out, adolescent thinking is a “second order system” in that the adolescent does not solve problems in terms of concrete givens, but uses those concrete facts to form hypotheses about an underlying reality. What appears to be the self for the child is only the set of elements from which the adolescent infers a set of personal beliefs and psychic style that uniquely characterize himself.

REFERENCE NOTES


REFERENCES


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