

Factors influence an individual's self-concept?



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Abstract

Self-concept is usually defined, in a generic sense, as the set of images, thoughts and feelings that an individual has of himself/herself.

Most authors interpret self-concept as a series of attitudes towards the self, globally integrated by three factors: cognitive, behavioral and affective.

Self-concept includes assessments of all parameters that are relevant to an individual's development: from physical appearance to social and intellectual capacities.

This essay will look at some factors that influence the development of an individual's self-concept: age, gender, education, media and culture.

Self-concept and factors of influence

Robert B. Burns (1979) interprets self-concept as a conceptualization that the individual made of her/his own self, being elaborated by powerful emotional and evaluative connotations. Moreover, the subjective beliefs and factual knowledge that the individual attributes to himself/herself are highly personal and intense, varying thereby in degrees to its unique identity.

With regard to self-esteem, Burns describe it as the process by which the individual examines his actions, skills and attributes compared to criteria and values that are internalized from society and significant others. However, self-esteem and self-concept are usually considered as interchangeable notions (Byrne, 1996; Harter, 1999).

In general terms, it can be distinguished three main characteristic of an individual's self concept (Bracken, 1996):

It is not innate: The individual's self concept is constantly being formed by experience. Moreover, it also depends on the symbolic language.

It is an organized whole: The individual tend to ignore perceived variables that are not adjusted to his/her conceptual whole, conforming thereby his/her own hierarchy of assessments.

It is dynamic: It can be modified by a reinterpretation of the own personality or external judgments.

Self-concept includes all the parameters that are considered relevant by an individual: from physical appearance to sexual capacities, social and intellectual abilities, age, media, culture, appliance, education, gender, income, environment, etc.

Outline of factors that can influence the development of an individual's self concept

As a dynamic attribute, an individual's self concept is characterized by being in a constant feedback (positive or negative) with the social environment, in which the opinions and assessments of the persons we establish intimate relations with (family, couple, friends), are determinant factors.

From the various factors that influence an individual's self-concept, the focus will be directed towards the following:

Age: Self-concept changes during the individual's life p, being its maximum peak of permeability from seven to twelve years old.

It then begins to be formed during childhood and starts to decrease at adolescence.

Gender: Although it exists considerable studies about gender differences in self-concept, it seems that there are no conclusive results regarding this issue.

Overall, the study of gender differences in self-concept in adolescence has generated considerable interest in recent decades. Despite the fact that the results of these studies are varied, most of them conclude that there are clear gender differences in self-concept, so that girls, particularly after the age of twelve, tend to have worse self-concept than boys. Thus, according to research, age acts as a moderating variable of the differences between girls and boys (Orenstein, 1995).

Education: Education is a vital feature for interpersonal development.

Academic achievements in the school as well as parental guiding and social interaction, are factors conforming the individual's self-concept.

Media: In contemporary society, the media is a vital factor of influence in the development of individual's self-concept. Perhaps the most relevant of its effects is on the conception of the body image. In this respect, advertising and marketing has been producing and reproducing a dissociation between 'ideal body image' and 'real body image'. Such dissociation might have pathological effects on individuals (i. e; from eating disorder to anxiety and depression).

Culture: Majority of the studies focus on the divergence between Western culture, characterized by a more dependent auto-conception of the self, and

Asian culture, in which interdependence stands as the fundamental factor in the development of self-concept.

Description of the factors that can influence the development of an individual's self-concept

AGE

The definition of oneself from 5-6 to 7-8 years provides an ability to discriminate between different domains of experience.

Between 7-8 years and 11-12, there are significant changes in regard to intellectual abilities and social environment, having remarkable implications for both self-concept and self-esteem. During this range of age, children have the ability to compare themselves to others, but the information extracted from such comparisons is just in service of self-evaluation (Byrne, 1996).

At the end of childhood, there is an increase in the permeability to social values, so the prototypes of each culture become another valuable source of comparison, which, in most cases, contribute to the discrepancy between the 'real self' and 'ideal self' (Harter, 1999).

GENDER

According to current research, age acts as a moderating variable of the differences in girls and boys.

In this respect, there are empirical evidence showing that girls have a positive perception of themselves during primary education and yet around

twelve, it is produced a decrease in self-confidence and acceptance of body image (Orenstein, 1995).

The role of women in society may be among the factors behind this decline in female self-esteem. Thus, the observation of what happens in their surroundings, take the girls to infer that their social role is secondary to that played by men.

By contrast, Crain (1996) insists that it is indispensable to remember that the gap between boys and girls about the different facets of self-concept is not exceedingly large, and thus such theories have a limited clinical and educational significance. Girls and boys are more alike than different, and the divergence between male and female are fairly consistent with gender stereotypes.

EDUCATION

Fundamentally within the field of Educational Psychology, there has been a constant preoccupation regarding the links between self-concept and academic performance. However, there is a lack of evidence indicating the precise nature of the relationship between both variables (Marsh and Seeshing, 1997).

What it is clear about the role of education in the development of an individual's self-concept is that it not only intervenes the relationship teacher-pupil, but also the rest of professionals within the educational system. Importantly, since education does not end in the school, family is key for a positive development of self-concept.

MEDIA

The media has been played a fundamental role in how individuals perceive themselves.

Importantly, marketing and advertising have been contributed to a general attitude of compulsive consumption as well as to the creation of an ideal body image as a way to personal and professional success.

Such strong pressure from the media about unattainable aesthetic models has as its immediate result an increase of personal dissatisfaction along with a rise in mental pathologies, such as depression, anxiety or eating disorders (Cash, 2011).

However, research shows that subjects with a positive self-concept are less vulnerable to the influence of the media than those with a lower self-esteem

CULTURE

Majority of research on cultural differences in self-concept is focused on the comparison between Asian and Western culture.

The former, collectivistic and vertical societies (high power distance), report higher belief in cognitive-behavioral consistency, share more belief related to dependent affiliation, but also agree more with belief related to achievement, self-direction and distinctiveness motivation (Smith and Bond, 1998).

By contrast, subjects from Western culture, vertical individualistic societies, report higher agreement with need for uniqueness and higher level of

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behavioral flexibility. Some authors state that such characteristics of individuals from Western culture are due to a higher importance of positive self-representation (Worchel et al, 1998)

Conclusion

An individual's self-concept undergoes notable changes during development, evolving from a structure in which diverse dominions of experience are distinguished to another stage in which the fundamental aspects are integration and high-level abstractions.

In summary, the development of the self-concept during the life p of an individual is subjected to multiple factors of influence.

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