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Development of the Self Concept in Black and White Children

Jeanne F. Beglis and Anees A. Sheikh*, *Marquette University*

The impact of the recent "black nationalism" movement, as manifested in such phenomena as the emphasis on "black is beautiful," the appearance of many more Blacks on television and in advertising, and heightened racial tension, is undoubtedly having a considerable effect upon this generation of black children. It could be predicted that the self-concepts of these children are being affected by this new social climate, and perhaps there is an increasing emphasis on racial pride in their self-perceptions.

This study, a comparison of the self-concept of Negro and white children, attempted to control the socio-economic level, a factor which has made comparisons of Blacks and Whites in much previous research rather equivocal. The variables of race, sex, and age, relative to the frequency with which a child used certain descriptive content categories to describe himself were then studied. Given the paucity of previous research with children on this topic, the present study was undertaken for its exploratory value and no predictions concerning its outcome were made.

METHOD

Subjects

Ss were 16 second grade, 40 fourth grade, and 24 sixth-grade pupils, attending two parochial elementary schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The three groups were evenly divided by sex and race. The populations of both schools were similar: both belonged to a low socio-economic level and had similar proportions of white and black children.

Instrument

A modified form of Kuhn and McPartland's Twenty Statements

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Test¹ was used. Kuhn and McPartland simply gave Ss a single sheet of paper and told them to write 20 different answers to the question: "Who am I?" in the order that occurred to them. In administering this test to the children, and to make it fit easily into a school day, the experimenter (E) found it necessary to give more extensive instructions and to impose a 5-minute time limit. Also, in order to make this test as unobtrusive as possible and to eliminate the bias possibly introduced by a new, white examiner, it was decided to have the test administered by the children's regular classroom teacher.

Procedure

A meeting was held for all teachers involved, at which E carefully explained the purpose of the study and the administration technique. Once a week for two successive weeks, at anytime in the class schedule but preferably at the same time each week, teachers were asked to give each pupil a sheet of paper (provided by E) with twenty numbered lines on it; instructions were to be read as follows:

Let's pretend that someone has just asked you, 'Who are you?' You are to write as many different things about yourself as you can in order to answer that question. Write each different thing on a different line—you can use words, phrases, or sentences. You have five minutes to do this; I'll tell you when to stop. Are there any questions? Ready? Begin.

Responses were classified according to content, and a child's "score" in any of eight such categories was the frequency of that particular type of response in S's record. The eight content categories were:

- (1) *Identification*: In this category were included "census-type" responses, such as address, year in school, position in family, sex, etc. Ex.: I am a human being.
- (2) *Evaluative Description*: In this category were included self-descriptions concerned with personality, ethical, and emotional aspects of self. Ex.: I have a bad temper.
- (3) *Body Image*: In this category were included physical self-descriptions, including clothing descriptions. Ex.: I have long blond hair.
- (4) *Ethnic or Racial Identification*: In this category were included responses classifying the self as belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group. Ex.: I'm Black and proud.
- (5) *Personal Preference*: In this category were included responses expressing likes or dislikes of persons or objects or activities. Ex.: My favorite sport is football.
- (6) *Competence/Task Achievement*: In this category were included responses describing the individual's skill and/or accomplishment or lack of same in school, sports, hobbies, etc. Ex.: I get good marks in spelling.

¹M. H. Huhn and T. S. McPartland, "An Empirical Investigation of Self-Attitude," *American Sociological Review*, XIX (1954), 68-76.

- (7) *Future Perspective*: In this category were included future-oriented statements, usually describing hoped-for events or occupations as an adult. Ex.: I hope to be a doctor when I grow up.
- (8) *Examiner Reference, Circumstantial Remarks*: In this category were included irrelevant responses, anecdotes, and statements about or questions directed to E. Ex.: Miss P. knows everyone in class. Are you going to teach 3rd grade?

Raw frequency scores in each S's content categories were transformed to proportions of the total number of each S's responses. Analyses of variance were performed for each of the eight categories separately to test the main and interaction effect of race, sex, age and administration. The last variable was included to determine whether the subjects' response changed from one session to another.

RESULTS

Significant main effects of age were obtained on categories 1 ($F=13.65$, $P < .001$), 3 ($F=3.52$, $P < .05$), 4 ($F=5.27$, $P < .01$), 5 ($F=10.19$, $P < .001$), 7 ($F=3.80$, $P < .05$), and 8 ($F=7.45$, $P < .001$). As Table I indicates, on categories 1 and 8, as the age of the S increases the tendency to use these categories decreases. Whereas, on categories 3, 4, 5 and 7 the increasing age has just the opposite effect. In other words, younger subjects tend to make more responses falling in the categories of 'identification' and 'examiner reference or circumstantial remarks' than do the older subjects. But with older subjects categories referring to body-image, ethnic or racial identification, personal preference, and future perspective were more popular.

The main effects of race were significant on categories 1 ($F=3.91$, $P < .05$) and 6 ($F=4.06$, $P < .05$). Black subjects made more responses that fell into the category of identification than did the white subjects, whereas on the category referring to competence or task achievement the difference was in the opposite direction.

The main effects for sex were not significant in any of the categories, and the main effect for administration was significant only in category 2 ($F=9.66$, $P < .005$), indicating that on the second administration of the test, the subjects tended to have fewer responses referring to evaluative description of themselves than they did on the first administration.

In addition to the foregoing main effects, a significant 'race x age x sex' interaction ($F=6.41$, $P < .005$) was obtained on category 4 (ethnic and racial identification). A subsequent examination of the means indicated that female black sixth graders gave more responses referring to racial identification than any of the other

TABLE I
*Means and Standard Deviations of Content
 Categories For All Three Age Groups*

AGE GROUP	CATEGORY							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Grade 2	M .6050	.0972	.0462	0.000	.0141	.0906	0.000	.1466
	SD 2.3769	.4097	.2112	0.000	.0706	.3944	0.000	.6333
Grade 4	M .4901	.0577	.0594	.0234	.1932	.1081	.0126	.0277
	SD 1.1688	.1649	.1759	.0805	.5048	.2957	.0584	.1021
Grade 6	M .2673	.1129	.1231	.0650	.2262	.1204	.0383	.0242
	SD .8628	.3923	.4368	.2586	.7442	.4082	.1533	.1638

subgroups. The differences between the black sixth grade girls and white sixth grade girls were especially marked. None of the subjects in the latter group referred to their racial identification.

DISCUSSION

It is evident that the age of the S is the primary determiner in the development of the self-concept. According to the results, the child describes himself differently at each consecutive age, progressing from the verbally limited, concrete concepts to more abstract self-perceptions. At the second grade level, the child tended to describe himself in terms of the most basic units of identification such as his address or membership in his family, without the use of qualifying adjectives. The limited school experiences in a narrowly circumscribed world were evident. At this stage responses categorized as examiner reference or circumstantial remarks were also very common. By the fourth grade, however, the quality of S's responses had changed, reflecting the importance of school achievements and peer relationships. The child's world had expanded and he tended to view himself as an individual with definite likes and dislikes, unstable as they perhaps were. This attempt to assert his individuality distinguished this age from the preceding one.

The data indicate that the changes that were noted at the fourth grade level tended to become more pronounced at the sixth grade level. The category referring to future oriented responses, supposedly indicative of growing maturity, was especially popular at the sixth grade level. At this stage there also were indications of female Ss' growing concern about their physical appearance, and an increasing awareness of the opposite sex on the part of both sexes. Perhaps as a ramification of the female Ss' concerns about their physical appearance and the reactions of others to this aspect, sixth grade black girls showed a marked increase in the tendency to identify themselves in terms of racial identity. Many of these responses were of the slogan type, such as "I am black and proud" or "I am black and beautiful," demonstrating the influence of the popularized versions of the emphasis on the development of a Negro identity and black pride. The fact that the black male Ss in sixth grade did not show a similar awareness was perhaps due to sex difference in both physical and emotional maturity.

The general trends in the development of the self-concept noted in the present investigation, are supported by findings of previous researchers. Yeatts² discovered that age was one of the primary

²Yeatts, P. P. "An Analysis of Developmental Changes in the Self-Report of Negro and White Children Grade 3-12," *Dissertation Abstracts*, XXIX [3-A] (1968), 823.

determiners of self-perception. Trickett³ found that self-concept changes between ages 6-7 and 10-11, which correspond approximately to the second grade and the fourth grade, respectively. These changes were interpreted as partially a result of increased school experience. Similarly, Kikuchi⁴ in a study with Japanese children, found the third and fourth grades to be a critical point in changing self-attitudes.

Concerning the main effect of race on self-concept, the present study revealed that the black subjects used more of category 1 and less of category 6 than the white subjects. In all other categories, there was no difference between the two groups. It appears that black children do tend to describe themselves more in terms of basic units of identification than do white children. There is a prevalence of the "census-type" responses such as address, year in school, position in family, sex, etc. In addition, there is a significant lack of references to skills and/or accomplishments. Any explanation of this race difference must await further research. It may be mentioned that Yeatts⁵ had found no effect of race on self-concept.

One rather puzzling result of the present study was the relative unimportance of the effect of the sex variable. Nash⁶ claimed that the "self-concept is never neuter" and that "it would be no exaggeration to say, therefore, that self-concept is essentially the concept of oneself as a male or female person."⁷ The previously cited study by Yeatts⁸ found the sex of S to be a significant variable, but the present study did not. One possible explanation might be found in the types of content categories used: with the exception of the body-image category, the other seven categories covered content areas that were presumably universally occurring at some stage of development. Responses which identified S as male or female were included under category 1, thus obscuring responses in which sexual identification was part of the self-description. Nevertheless, one might hypothesize that with a more sensitive content classification, Nash's contention that "it seems a reasonable presumption that girls and boys do have differing body images underlying the self-concept,"⁹ might be verified.

³H. V. Trickett, "Stability and Predictability of Children's Self-Concept and Perceptions by Others: A Developmental Study," *Dissertation Abstracts*, XXIX [8-A] (1969), 2577.

⁴T. Kikuchi, "Investigation of the Self-Concept of Children and Adolescents by a Modified Method of Twenty Statements Test," *Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, XXVII (1968), 22-31.

⁵Yeatts, *op. cit.*

⁶J. Nash. *Developmental Psychology: A Psychophysiological Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice - Hall, 1970).

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁸Yeatts, *op. cit.*

⁹Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

As in all self-reports tapping phenomenological variables, the instrument used was subject to many uncontrolled influences. Among the most potentially influential was S's vocabulary and verbal facility. Since the second grade group was still at an elementary stage of literacy, their self-descriptions were perhaps necessarily limited to those which they could express in writing within five minutes. It was also likely that many Ss were too concerned with proper spelling since their regular classroom teachers administered the test and several of these teachers later expressed their concern that misspelled words would reflect on their quality of teaching. This concern was probably communicated to the children. Therefore, the difference in content of responses at different age levels may be at least partially a function of lack of vocabulary and verbal facility.