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Self indicators in adolescent's self reports

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Abstract

Studying the construction of identity in adolescence (Erikson, 1968) we use some elements of Bruner's Cultural Psychology (1990). In particular we refer to the indicators of Self identified by Bruner (1998) in text-type self-reports analysis. Adopting Bruner's indicators allows to understand the most popular qualities that the current generation of adolescents uses as a point of reference in the identity construction process

Keywords: Adolescence; identity construction; self image; self indicator

1. Objective

The study intends to explore which are the main qualities referred to self image used by adolescents to describe themselves. The aim is to understand how adolescents between 15 and 17 years use to approach the phase-specific task consisting in the construction of their identity (Erikson, 1982; Kunnen & Bosma, 2005).

The possibility to write something about their self image through self-report allows the participants to be directly involved in the search for meaning, offering an opportunity to reflect on their identity, and enabling them to test a version of their significant stories. The narrative writing can also support informed choices at a crucial stage, as the adolescence can be considered.

2. Theoretical framework

Studying the construction of identity in adolescence we refer to the contribution of Erikson (1982), and the next revisions made by Marcia (1980), and Bosma (1985). We also use some elements of Bruner's Cultural Psychology (1990). In particular we apply the indicators of Self identified by Bruner (1998) in text-type self-reports analysis.

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Indicators of Self are listed below:

- action - practical activities in which the subject is personally involved, acts of free choice undertaken in order to create a design or a purpose (eg. I like football, I practice it 5 times a week; I'm a guy who loves nature and to stay outdoors)
- commitment - adoption and/or opposition to rules and actions done in their name. Direct involvement of the subject in action, company, task (eg. I am striving to find the easiest way to get to the point; I like to become a mechanic because I like riding bike)
- resources - cognitive and social strategies necessary to achieve goals or overcome obstacles that hinder the implementation of projects (eg. My character is open; I have a good disposition towards new ideas and change)
- consistency - the narrator's willingness to build a story with an internal logic, creating a scenario in which events make sense (eg. I realized that since all my friends -when they have problems- ask for my help)
- qualities – expressions about Self in terms of perceptual and qualitative dimensions related to the body and the inner world (eg. I think I'm an ambitious and determined person, that knows and wants to achieve his own objectives)
- reflexivity - refers to the meta cognitive part of Self and to the ways of thinking used by the author to carry out the analysis of past or current experiences (eg. in my life I use to think twice before doing things because you have to think about what you are doing or what you will do)
- social referencing - network and social ties which become a reference for the Self, for choices, and to justify own values and projects (eg. I'm very well with my friends, through their feedback I understand to be very funny and comic)
- evaluation - the narrator's desire to express an opinion on his own or other's behaviours and events, observing them as external, in a detached position (eg. this time I don't love so much; everyone says that adolescence is ugly and I agree with him)
- location - reveals how an individual is placed in time, space and social position (eg. I am a 13 year old boy, physically I consider myself as a medium height boys with green eyes and brown hair).

3. The sample

The analysed sample is represented by two groups of adolescents belonging to two different ages: 15 years old (54 subjects attending the last year of a second-grade secondary school: 27 males and 27 females) and 17 years old (40 subjects attended the penultimate year of a second-grade secondary school: 30 males and 10 females).

4. Method

We used a questionnaire of self-presentation (Zuczkowski, 1976; Nicolini, 1999) containing open-ended questions, requiring the participants to provide a description of themselves both for the direct image and the reflected image (Cooley, 1902). In this paper the analysis will focus the detection of self markers used in the first reply to the question: 'Talk about you: how do you think you are?' In this section of the questionnaire the focus is on the exploration of the direct image, that is to say the conception of Self based more on private reflection than on others' feedback.

We used NVIVO, a software that enables a lexicon-metrical analysis of texts. We agreed to adopt as unit-analysis the sentence from point to point and, in some cases, depending on the meaning, the sentence closed with a semicolon or a colon. For each unit-analysis one of the self indicators was attributed, according to the prevalent content expressed. We conducted the analysis independently, with an agreement of 93% of cases. The conflicting assignments were discussed, and reallocated at a later time.

5. Results

5.1. Age groups differences

At the moment we can see that the most frequent indicator in both groups (tab. 1) is related to 'qualities' even thought with a greater extent by the females (F 54%, M 43%); the use of expressions factorizable through this indicator can be interpreted the desire to highlight the outer dimensions of one's self and those aspects referring to what an individual feels, feels he/she loves and he/she thinks he/she is.

Table 1. self indicators quotations – age groups

Self indicators	15 M	% (15 sample)	15 F	% (15 sample)	Tot	%	17 M	% (17 sample)	17 F	% (17 sample)	tot	%
Quality	50	18	73	26	123	43	69	35	38	19	107	54
Action	22	8	16	6	38	13	19	10	5	3	24	12
Resources	19	7	18	6	37	13	7	4	4	2	11	6
Commitment	12	4	16	6	28	10	9	5	1	1	10	5
Social Referencing	12	4	22	8	34	12	11	6	6	3	17	9
Location	4	1	1	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reflexivity	4	1	3	1	7	2	5	3	0	0	5	3
Evaluation	4	1	5	2	9	3	11	6	2	1	13	7
Consistency	0	0	3	1	3	1	5	3	4	2	9	5
Total	127	45	157	55	284	100	136	69	60	30	196	100

In this sense, pre-adolescents show a dimension of self related to descriptive elements linked to their emotional and experience world (F: summarizing in a word I'm very affectionate, M: I think I'm a sunny and cheerful boy, very stubborn and tenacious convinced of his own decisions).

The other indicators are present, as well, although with less frequency than the previous. This could be seen as a tendency for preteens to test themselves and their possibilities, waiting to identify the most significant features of one's self useful to differentiate themselves from their peers.

With regard to the similarities, we found out that in both groups references to 'action' are present in quite equal measure. 'Action' may indicate the preference for a self-image referred to practical things that are carried out and implemented (M: I love reading; I like to play drums).

Taking into account the main differences, the indicators of 'commitment', 'resources' and 'social referencing' is prevalent in the 15 years old group; 'social reference' indicator can represent the importance for girls to belong to a group or an environment (F: This is one of the reasons why my friends appreciate me). In the 17 years old group, indicators such as 'evaluation' and 'consistency' are more quoted than in the younger group, they are linked to introspective dimensions and to inner world (eg. evaluation: M – in this period I have outbursts during which it's better to leave me alone; F - I like my flaws because they stand out me by the mass; eg consistency: M - I have learned over time to evaluate all possible solutions and choose the best; F - I can admit the mistakes and get better).

5.1.1. 15 years old group

Among other indicators, we find a greater use by males than females both for those referring to 'action' (F 6%, M 8%) and for those related to 'resources' (F 6%, M 7%). The reference to 'action' indicates a way to describe themselves by externals aspects and things done that characterize the young than others. This is typical in a phase of growth linked to concrete experiences that will lead to an evolutionary phase of increased awareness of themself (Nicolini, Bomprezzi, Cherubini, 2009). In fact, in the males' group we find a low quotation to Self indicators that

could be referred to inner dimensions, such as: 'consistency', 'reflexivity' and 'evaluation'. To have the possibility to use such indicators in a self report is necessary to have self-awareness and a realistic representation of personal abilities, that are both processes undeveloped at this age (Confalonieri, 2000).

We could also note references to the 'commitment' indicator (M 4%, 6% F). This confirms that both groups, but more females, describe themselves in terms of experimentation and discovery of their own potential (M: when I grow up I'd like to make a beautiful work based on mathematical knowledge, F: I would like to improve myself in order to try to be less moody), to identify strategies and appropriate resources to implement future projects.

Another Self indicator on which to focus attention is 'social reference' that is more present in females (M 4%, 8% F). It indicates interdependence and attention towards the other, demonstrating once again - through the citations of others in their self descriptions - the importance of interaction with significant others for the development of the Self. 'Social reference' mainly concerns the presence of belonging to a specific social environment or the quotation to significant others (M - I talk little with my family I'm very close to my grandmother because I spent my childhood with her; F - I love being in the company especially with my friends).

5.1.2. 17 years old group

With regards to the 17yers old group, we observe a non-homogeneous distribution within the two groups of subjects: for example in males group there is a strong use of indicators referring to 'action' (10%) followed by those related to 'social reference' and 'evaluation' (both 6%). As mentioned for the group of pre-teens, the reference to 'action' indicates a way to describe themselves linked to the exteriority of the person and the things done which connote the adolescent compared to the other. The 'social reference' shows the importance of the relationship with others for the development of the Self (Mead, 1934; Palmonari, 2011). The Self indicator 'evaluation' refers to how a teenager assess herself/himself in terms of future projects and their outcomes.

In females group we find a different order than that shown by their male peers. In fact, among the most used indicators there is the 'social reference' first, then 'action' and the reference to 'resources' and 'consistency' s third. The presence of indicators such as 'resources' and 'consistency' is important because they shows a tendency to refer to their own resources when young people talk about themselves and recognize what are the qualities that distinguish them from others. It helps them to define themselves in terms of personality. The presence of these indicators together with 'social reference' is particularly significant, because it is thanks to the relationship and interactions with others that people can better know and differentiate their self-image in the identity building process.

A similar aspect between the two subgroups of this sample is that there are no quotes for indicators related to 'location'. This means that teenagers in speaking of himself do not refer to elements linked to social position but would rather use characteristics related to personality or personal resources.

5.2. Gender

With respect to gender (tab. 2), the 'qualities' remain the most used indicator both by males and females. Other indicators has a not-homogeneous distribution in the two groups of subjects.

Looking at the similarities, we note that in both groups, references are made in equal measure to the indicators 'resources' (both 10%) and 'commitment' (both 8%). With regard to the differences, in males group indicators like 'action' and 'evaluation' are more present, while in the female sample the 'social referring' indicator is frequently used.

The references to 'resources' and 'commitment' are intended to address people characteristics in terms of the improvement of their own self-image. 'Resources' refer to the qualities that a subject recognizes in himself/herself, while 'commitment' refers to the tenacity and determination in achieving a goal set (eg resources M: I try to follow my ideals fully F: lot for what I believe in, eg. commitment M: but right now I'm improving, F: if there is any problem I face it and I do not avoid it).

Table 2. self indicators quotations – gender groups

Self indicators	15y M	% (15 sample)	17y M	% (17 sample)	Tot (m group)	%	15y F	% (15 sample)	17y F	% (17 sample)	Tot (f group)	%
Quality	50	18	69	35	119	45%	73	26	38	19	111	51%
Action	22	8	19	10	41	16%	16	6	5	3	21	10%
resources	19	7	7	4	26	10%	18	6	4	2	22	10%
commitment	12	4	9	5	21	8%	16	6	1	1	17	8%
Social referencing	12	4	11	6	23	9%	22	8	6	3	28	13%
location	4	1	0	0	4	2%	1	0	0	0	1	0%
reflexivity	4	1	5	3	9	3%	3	1	0	0	3	1%
evaluation	4	1	11	6	15	6%	5	2	2	1	7	3%
consistency	0	0	5	3	5	2%	3	1	4	2	7	3%
Total	127	45	136	69	263	100%	157	55	60	30	217	100%

5.2.1. Male

In this subgroup we can see how similar is the use of the indicator 'action' (8% pre-teen, teen 10%), 'commitment' (4% pre-teen, teen 5%) and 'social reference' (4% pre-teen, teen 6%).

The difference that emerges between these two age groups is represented by a greater use -for teens- to the evaluation of person characteristics (pre-teen: 'evaluation' 1%, 'consistency' 0%); at the other part -pre-teens- refer elements concerning external environment or their individual capacities (teen: 'location' 0%, 'resources' 4%).

The indicators referring to the 'evaluation' (eg. I like my faults because they stand out me from the crowd, I'm not able to say if I'm wrong or others are) point out the teen's reflection on aspects of private self not only to understand more about himself, but moreover to experience a comparison with the outside world. Those referring to the 'consistency' (eg, with time I learned to evaluate all the possible solutions and choose the best, I'm able to admit mistakes and to improve myself) refer to the acquisition, by the adolescent, to a greater capacity of self-reflection and to analyze, also in a critical manner, situations and /or interactions.

These data confirm with what is theorized by Erikson on the identity formation process, according to which the development trend is one that goes to the acquisition of a sense of identity (1968, 1982): to have a stable self-concept, the young must experiment and overcome some changes. Through the interactions with others pre-teens can experience different parts of themselves ('location', 'resources', 'social referencing'), having the possibility during the adolescence to self-assess the peculiar characteristics of their singular "self" ('consistency', 'evaluation', 'reflexivity').

5.2.2. Female

As for the rest of the observations made, even in the females sample the indicator 'quality' is the most widely used, there are not any others with such high frequency of citations. Females, both pre-adolescents and adolescents, seem to prefer to talk about themselves in terms of the signals of the "feeling of life ... signs of the subjectivity of identity" (Bruner, 1997, p. 145-161).

There are many differences between the two age groups: in pre-adolescents the 'commitment' (pre-teens 6% , teens 1%) and the 'resources' (pre-teens 6%, teens 2%) indicators are mainly used; in adolescents the reference to the indicators 'coherence' (pre-teens 1%; teens 7%,) is high.

6. Discussion

The present study aims to view aspects related to the construction of self image in adolescents, following an approach related to the analysis of self report questionnaire.

The analysis allowed us to observe the recurrence of 'qualities' indicator in the whole sample (tab. 1). This indicator reveals the attention of adolescents to the private dimensions of self-image, that is to say their feelings and thoughts (eg. Summing up in one word I'm tender; I think I'm a solar and cheerful guy; I'm very stubborn and tenacious when I'm convinced about my own decisions). In particular the group of 17 year olds uses with high frequency this indicator (tab. 1), in particular referring to the characteristics of self that influence the interaction with other people (Damon Hart 1982; Mancini 1996; Mancini, Secchiaroli 1998). At the same time we found in this group the 'reflexivity' is the less used indicator, this output read together with other can emphasize adolescent's difficulty to have an integrated self image (Confalonieri, 2000).

The frequent use of expressions which refer to the 'social referencing', emphasizes the importance of relational dimensions in the construction of self image, and the role they play in the identity building process. This indicator refers to the presence of references to the social environment of belonging and considerable other significant features (eg M: I do not talk with my family I am very close to my grandmother because I spent my childhood with her, F: I love being in the company especially with my friends).

Confirming a trend observed in previous studies (Bernstein, 1971) we found self indicator referring to 'actions' (eg. I love reading; I like to play the drums) in a greater extent than those relating to the 'evaluation' in the younger group, with a gender difference in favor of males (tab 2). This finding may suggest the need to describe themselves through what is easier to show to the others as that which is external or affects behaviour.

In the group of 17 years old (tab 1) the most common expressions seem to be linked to an examination and test of the identity (Palmonari, 2011). In this group, adolescents use in a high percentage the indicators that reflect the changes in the adolescent period and, at the same time, those who help young people to tell about their Self-under construction, through the experiment and the reflect a more mature and adult placement (Palmonari, 2011).

Thanks to the acquisition of formal thought the teenager is able to focus more on the internal and/or psychological characteristics, that is in accordance with what is indicated by the model of S. Harter (1983, 1994) on the change of self-concept in adolescence, based on the stages of cognitive development outlined by Piaget (1947). We can assume, then, that the expressions referred to the indicator of 'evaluation', 'coherence' or 'reflexivity' could be assimilated to the processes of commitment and exploration in depth. Such attention to themselves, aimed at the search for greater coherence in itself, is reflected in the assumptions of Marcia's model of identity (1993a, 1993b). Marcia considered 'exploration' and 'commitment' as the base of the process construction of identity.

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