

WCES-2010

Self report and self image: a study on a sample of Italian adolescents

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Received October 8, 2009; revised December 17, 2009; accepted January 5, 2010

Abstract

We deal with self reports written by adolescents of the first classes of high school, in central Italy. Being the self report questionnaire built in order to explore both the *self representation* and the *looking glass self*, we consider that the written texts can provide important information about the identity building process. In fact, the redundancy of adjectives and verbal expressions used to present her/himself can offer elements on the qualities considered by adolescents the most important to possess within social interactions with adults (relatives and teachers) and with peers (friends and classmates).

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Keywords: Adolescence; self image; self report; identity building process; Observation process; observation competencies; multiple intelligences theory; community of practice.

1. Introduction

We are concerned in the developmental task of identity building in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Adolescence represents a privileged moment in which the individual realized to possess a complex and structured inner world, which characterizes and identifies her/him with respect to others (Inhelder and Piaget, 1955). This discovery allows the emergence of a cognitive, social and emotional representation, that the adolescent sees as self-image. Self-image provides a fundamental sense of continuity in time and on space. It is also useful in order to integrate and organize the experiences which the individual feels important.

In recent approaches of social psychology emerges in a clear way the shift from a monolithic conception that consider the self-concept as stable over time and constant across situations to one that emphasizes, on the contrary, the dramatic changes that may occur in relation to the situational and motivational aspects of social interaction. A concept of self as multiplicity is emerging in which possible selves are placed, with different structure and focus, which represent positive and negative self-image (Caprara, 1995).

Self concept is considered inextricably linked to social relationships, through which it is continuously modified and re-created, based on the numerous feedbacks that the individual receives (Cooley, 1902; Bruner, 1990).

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2. Finality and Method

The research aims to explore the qualities on which 14/15 years old adolescents gravitate their self-description, using both self-reflection and the feedback from significant others such as relatives, teachers, friends and classmates.

The research is qualitative in the sense that the collected data will be analyzed in their particularity and uniqueness, as an expression of a specific environment and territory, without necessarily wanting to plan generalizations or comparative statements. The chosen instruments gave more value to the relationship with the participants than to the accuracy of results, in line with ethical aspects of research in psychology, especially since the adolescents are involved in a delicate moment of their life. We asked them to write a self report consisting of fifteen open questions with which we wanted to help the adolescents to know and to enrich their self image. In that sense, the investigation takes on the characteristics of an action research, because it has allowed to acquire information, and at the same time to share the results with those involved..

3. The sample

The research, part of a broader three-year project in health education and prevention of alcohol abuse (Nicolini, Bompreszi, Cherubini 2009), involved about 2,000 students from different types of 5 high schools in a coastal town of central Italy. The type of school is varied and offers lyceums, technical and vocational institutes, thus ensuring the participation of very different socio-cultural kind of teenagers. The data currently processed, that will be presented and discussed below, are related to the scholastic year 2008/09. By the 492 young people involved we excluded the repeating students (111), for two reasons: they are older than the others and the scholastic failure probably has an influence in their self concept. The sample is then composed of 381 valid questionnaires.

4. The adopted devices

We used a self-report questionnaire (Zuczkowski, 1976), consisting of fifteen open questions posed on five different sheets: the first one includes a single question “About you: how do you think you are?”. The other four pages contain four questions each, according to the following structure: “In your opinion, what do your familiars - friends - teachers - classmates – think about you?” “What do they appreciate of you?” “What do they depreciate of you?” “How do they speak of you?” (Nicolini, 1999; Nicolini, Bompreszi 2003). While in the first sheet a direct reflection on herself/himself is required, the other questions invite to think about the reflected image (Cooley, 1902) keeping in consideration the *significant* others (Crittenden, 1994, Crittenden 1999) for adolescents (Palmonari, 1997).

5. Data treatment

The protocols of self-presentation, collected anonymously, were treated as linguistic texts and entered into a word processor (Word). Then they were studied using a software (TaLTaC2) in accordance with a lexicostatistics approach, which enables both semantic and content analysis. In addition the computation of occurrences in the texts corpus is also available.

We found 4986 different graphic elements (words) and 51452 occurrences in the corpus, with an average frequency of 10.32. A selection of graphic forms detected by the program was made, with the aim to analyze only those words that the adolescents used to express a qualities related to themselves. This is the reason why graphic forms such as conjunctions, adverbs, prepositions, verbs, etc. were eliminated. In the selected corpus we considered only the graphic forms with more than 10 occurrences, reducing the total occurrences (6295) in 112 graphic forms (average frequency 56,20). We then considered only the graphic forms with a frequency over 10%.

6. Some results

At the moment the research is ongoing and the results are still partial. What emerges from the analysis, however, is already interesting.

6.1. Null texts

We consider important to illustrate what we consider as null texts. In fact, on 381 valid protocols, in 95 cases the adolescents wrote that they don't know how to answer the questions. It is possible to interpret this data as they really don't have sufficient information, as well as a way to skip the reflection requested and/or to quickly write something. The majority of this kind of answers is related to the self image reflected by the teachers.

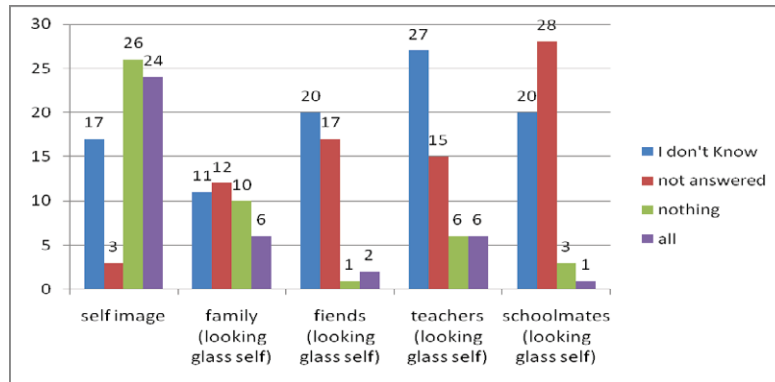


Figure 1: Null texts in the corpus

Nothing (46) and *all* (39) answers (85) are considered null because they don't vehicle any kind of information. They can be interpreted both as a lack of analytic reflection and a rapid way to solve the problem to answer. Both the types occurred for the majority in the first part of the questionnaire, that is to say in relation with self image exploration. It is an important data because it can show a real difficulty to reflect directly on herself/himself, while can be perceived an easier task to write something based on others' feedback. The parts of the questionnaire in which the adolescents don't answer (75) grow passing from the first to the last group of questions. It can be due to a certain tiredness in writing.

6.2. The most frequent qualities

In the following graphic we illustrate the most frequent adjectives which the adolescents who participated to our research used in their self reports. The list comes from the elaboration of the whole texts, that is to say that the adjectives here calculated can be present in any part of the questionnaire.

The adjective *sympathetic* clearly appears as the most used, with 777 occurrences (more than 3 times than any other). The meaning of *sympathetic* is linked to the kind of the social relationship and can show the necessity of adolescents to be in touch with others. It also can reveal the need of adolescents to be accepted. It is even more true if we keep in consideration the fact that the classes in which we collected data are in their first year, that is to say that boys and girls don't really know each other. The other adjectives are frequently connected to social dimensions (*chatter, frank, cheerful, shy* and so on). Little quotations appear to cognitive (*swat, fine, clever*) and bodily qualities (*sporting, physical peculiarity*), even less to moral aspects (*responsible*).

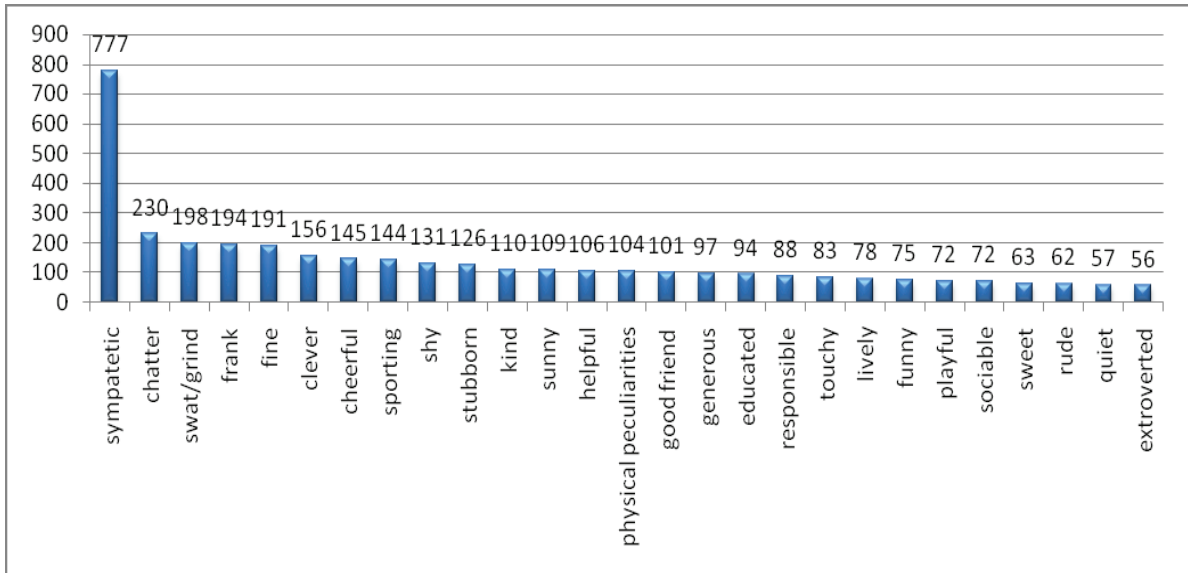


Figure 2: Most frequent adjectives referred by the adolescents to themselves

6.3. The qualities of the self image

In this case we present the qualities referred by the students answering to the first question “About you: how do you think you are?”. Again we found that the adjective *sympathetic* is the more present (172). It reveals how much to be in relation with others and to receive social positive reception is considered important by the adolescents. The other main qualities are also linked to social aspect (*shy*, *sunny*, *cheerful*, *sociable*). 198 occurrences are related to physical aspects and 101 to the affective dimension of the relationship (*good friend*). As well as the participants to the survey are boys and girls 14/15 years old, the presence of physical dimensions can be considered still typical. On the contrary it is important to underline the complete lack of cognitive and moral qualities. It can suggest that they are not meaningful qualities for adolescents.

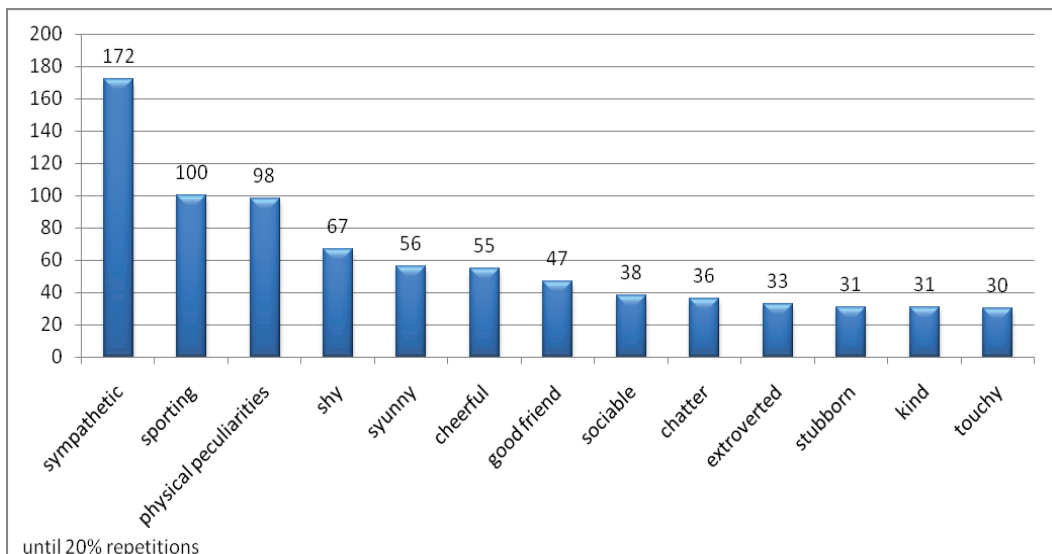


Figure 3: (%) Most frequent adjectives for the self-image

6.4. The quality of the image reflected by adults (family, teachers)

The following graphics represent the adjectives coming from the answers written in the parts of the questionnaire dedicated to the looking glass self. We now can consider the qualities quoted by the adolescents and related to significant adults such as relatives and teachers.

6.4.1. Relatives' looking glass self

The main qualities linked to the relatives' looking glass self express moral (214) and cognitive (146) dimensions.

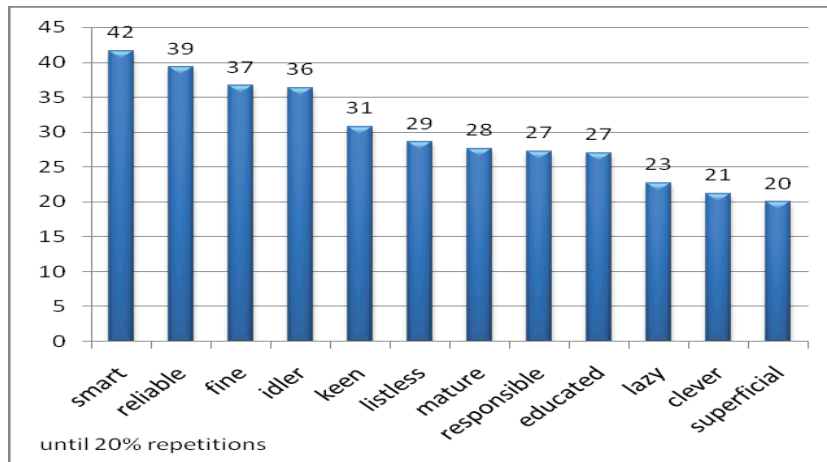


Figure 4: (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (relatives)

It is usual to think about moral qualities as requested in the context of a family. Unusual the presence of cognitive dimensions, perhaps due to the influence of the scholastic situation in which the questionnaires were collected. It can be possible that the participants activated a special attention to the scholastic aspects as far as parents pay attention to their learning outcomes and marks.

6.4.2. Teachers' looking glass self

With regard to the qualities related to teachers' looking glass self, in this part of the protocol the majority expresses social aspects (150), that is to say *bored*, *messy*, *educated*, *calm*. It can be interpreted as if the teacher mainly interact with adolescents in order to manage social relationship in the class.

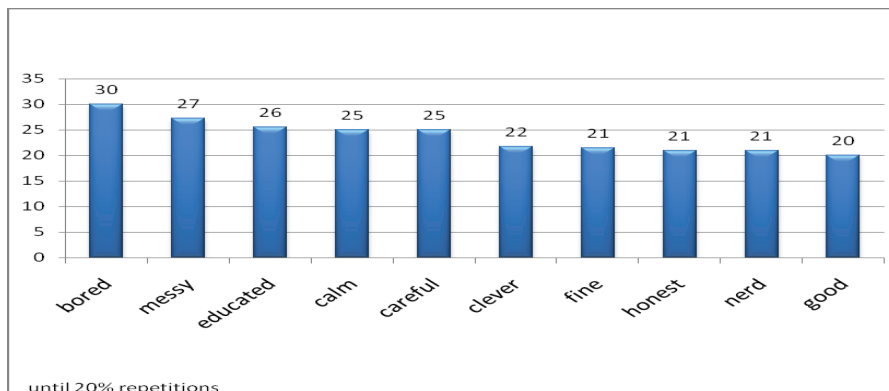


Figure 5: (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (teachers)

Only 43 occurrences are linked to cognitive traits. It is the opposite of what can be expected in a scholastic context, in which learning processes should be focused. Obviously it is the students’ point of view, in any case it represents an important signal about the kind of representation they possess on scholastic system. It can also be a significant information about the way the students perceive the context and consequently orient their behaviors when they are at school.

6.5. The quality of the image reflected by peers (friends, schoolmates)

The main qualities linked to the peers’ looking glass self express social traits (246). It is typical of adolescence, in which the developmental task is to leave the family and to project the future. This is the reason why the adolescents are pushed towards their peers.

6.5.1. Friends’ looking glass self

With regard to the answers provided in the part of the questionnaire directed to explore the world of friends, the mainly used adjectives are the following. Apart from the adjective *reliable*, that seems to suggest a moral dimension (at least in the Italian language), and the expression *good friend* that seems to allude to an affective component, the other adjectives appear wholly related to the social level of the relation.

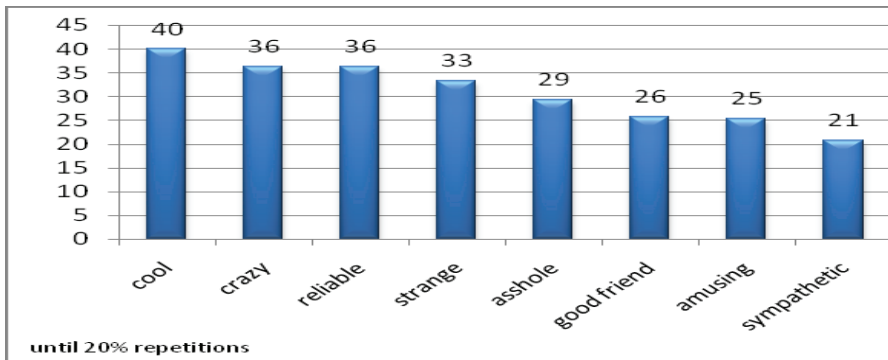


Figure 6: (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (friends)

6.5.2. Schoolmates’ looking glass self

The graphic related to the qualities referred with regard to classmates’ looking glass self is not very different from the previous.

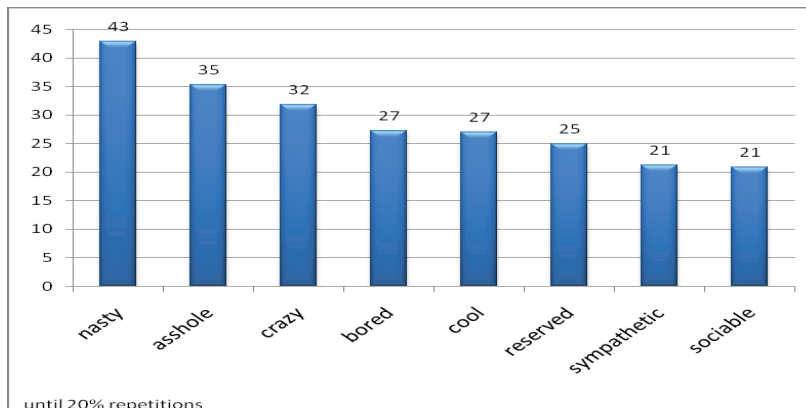


Figure 7: (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (schoolmates)

In order to identify possible differences, it can be useful to put together the data presented in the two last figures. The adjectives *cool*, *crazy*, *asshole* and *sympathetic* are present in both the parts of the questionnaire. It is possible to suppose that, apart from *asshole*, the other are used in a positive way (*crazy* is often used to mean amusing or even creative). This positive image seems to be reinforced by the other mentioned characteristics, such as *reliable*, *good friend* and *amusing* at least. *Strange* can be positively as well as negatively intended. In fact, sometimes it is used in the sense of creative or eccentric, but it is also used as a synonymous of misfit or rebel. In any case the friends' looking glass self appears as a safe field.

More troublesome seems to be the relationship with classmates. The adjectives *cool*, *crazy* and *sympathetic* can be managed as before, interpreting them in a positive way. In this case they are reinforced only by the adjective *sociable*, being a quality such as *reserved* not necessarily positive. In fact to be *reserved* can mean to be educated but more often to be shy, unapproachable, uncommunicative or even coy. In addition, the adjectives *nasty* and *bored* undoubtedly represents negative component in self representation.

7. Conclusion

As the research is ongoing it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion. We can only outline three main guidelines. The first regards the developmental task of adolescents, that is to say the construction of their identity. Interesting indications emerged about the qualities on which adolescents seem to realize this task. The great use of an adjective such as *sympathetic* allows to think they mainly use a social criterion, that can invade also fields such as school and family, in which cognitive or moral qualities are not only more useful but maybe suitable.

Our data suggests that school is a complex field, both with respect of teachers and classmates, as the null answers suggest from the starting point. Something wrong seems to go on in the school (maybe it is an Italian problem) as well as cognitive dimensions related to scholastic context do not appear in a significant frequency in the collected data. Even if teachers seem to be mainly claimed to manage social interactions in the class, classmates' relationships appear under a negative/problematic connotation. In the worse case it reveals a failure, in the best case it notices a topic on which it is important to work.

Another indication arises for adults, who can support (or not) the developmental task of adolescents to become adults. As the self-image is mainly formed within the feedback of significant others, the awareness that communication is a privileged place for the coming out of *self* is the starting point for any consideration. Only a competent management of communicative exchanges can guarantee a correct scaffolding to the new identity under construction.

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