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Who I Am: Exploring the nature and meaning of children's active and social selves

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2011) by Mimi Tatlow-Golden of the School of Psychology, University College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

The aim of this study was to develop a richer picture of children's core self-concept factors and their meaning in order to increase adults' understanding of the self factors that children value most. In addition, since self-esteem is based on core self-concept factors, the study aimed to use this richer understanding to assess the content validity of widely used self-esteem questionnaires. The central objectives were:

- » to develop a richer picture of children's core self-concept factors, with a focus on their active and social selves;
- » to compare children's core self factors with adults' conceptualisations of children's self-concept and self-esteem.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Dublin.

3. How was the study undertaken?

Over 600 children, aged 10-13 years and attending 5th or 6th class in urban co-educational national schools, took part in the study. Schools were stratified by size and community, and then randomly selected from across the Dublin region. Children's participation was voluntary and parental consent was secured.

In order to achieve the study's objectives and to appeal to children's preferences and their expertise, multiple methods were employed, and 5th and 6th class pupils were involved in one analytical phase. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were integrated at several stages of the study. The following methods were chosen:

- » For key salient active and social self factors, children were invited to draw and write about their favourite things to do and about their favourite person or people.
- » With analogue scales and a 'Who I Am' pie, children rated the importance of self factors.
- » Each child also completed a self-esteem scale: the Piers-Harris 2 Self-concept Scale for Children (P-H 2), the Self-perception Profile for Children (SPPC) or the Self-description Questionnaire I (SDQI).
- » Finally, follow-up individual interviews with a randomly selected sub-sample of over 100 children explored the meaning of their salient self-concept factors.

4. What are the key findings?

Children's active and social selves were found to be rich and diverse. Children described a very wide range of salient self factors and a complex and nuanced set of meanings associated with them. Many of these self factors and meanings were found to be absent from widely used self-esteem scales designed for children.

4.1 Children's active selves and their meanings

Over 150 salient activities were depicted by the children in this study. Some activities were structured (adult-led), while others were peer-based or more solitary. Across the group, children's most favoured active selves involved:

- » being physically active in team sports and other physical activities (such as individual sports or unstructured, peer-based physical activities);
- » being creative in many different modes (music, drama, visual, written and more);
- » using media (for personal entertainment and education, as well as social networking);
- » being social with friends, family and pets.

In addition, children described a detailed set of meanings they associated with these active selves. The primary meanings were:

- » experiencing a sense of social connection, primarily with friends and also with family;
- » being challenged in the activity and improving their skills;
- » having fun;
- » being physically active;
- » time as a factor: how long or how often they engaged in the activity.

Being physically active in various different ways and being creative were most frequently cited and found to be associated with the widest range of meanings for the children in this study. Interestingly, the meanings children described for these activities suggested that playing team sports, being physically active in many other ways and being creative fulfil similar roles in children's selves.

4.2 Children's social selves and their meanings

The major salient social relationships for the children in this study were those with family (including pets) and friends, and they were cited in the following order of frequency:

- » parents;
- » siblings;
- » friends;

- » extended family;
- » pets;
- » celebrities, fictional and religious figures and others were rarely cited.

The meanings that children associated with these salient people were quite similar. The central meanings were:

- » being cared for (emotionally and practically);
- » having fun;
- » sharing activities and interests (including talking) with friends and family;
- » liking or occasionally loving people (and sometimes fighting with them).

Overall, family members were described as providing both emotional and practical care, while friends provided emotional care only. Both family and friends provided fun, sharing and talking. Fighting was largely reserved for sibling relationships, although these were usually described in positive terms overall.

4.3 Patterns of findings relating to gender

Many patterns were identified across methods in this study. Some were gender-related, for example:

- » physical activity (particularly team sports) and media-related activities were more frequently cited by boys than girls;
- » hobbies and creative activities were more salient to girls, as were pets.

At the same time, however, it was noted that although gender trends could be identified, many were quite weak. For example, non-team physical activities were more salient to girls than boys.

In addition, it was found that for the meanings children associated with their active and social selves, there were almost no gender differences. Thus, both boys and girls valued their chosen activities and people for broadly similar reasons – such as being social in physical activities and being cared for emotionally by family and friends.

4.4 Patterns of findings relating to pets

Across the active and social self, the study found that pets were highly salient to a substantial minority of children; for example, 1 in 3 interviewees described a pet as salient to them (including children who did not have a pet). Children described and drew a wide range of animals – dogs, cats and horses were the

most common, but hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, lizards and snakes were also mentioned. Again, many reasons were cited for a pet's salience. The most frequent one was fun and play. Other reasons included feeling emotionally connected to a pet and entrusting it with secrets, loving a pet (it was notable that this was described more effusively than love for family or friends) and enjoying a pet's amusing, communicative and tactile qualities.

4.5 How self-esteem scales compare with children's self-descriptions

One of the purposes of developing a richer understanding of children's active and social selves was to enhance understanding of the content of self-esteem scales. When examining the scales cited (see Section 3 above), it was found that their active and social self questions focus primarily on three areas: school ability, team sport ability and peer popularity. Family relationships are largely absent from these scales (only the SDQI has a parent subscale, and none of the scales had sibling subscales), as are activities other than team sports.

The self-concept descriptions of children in this study, however, had quite a different focus. For example, children's self-descriptions did not reflect adults' interest in their school ability – indeed, school was notably absent from almost all children's accounts. In addition, while children frequently cited team sports, they did not consider them meaningful because of their ability levels at these sports; rather, they described team sports as sociable and fun, expressed satisfaction at improving their skills over time and described the pleasure of being physically active. Furthermore, where peers were concerned, across all methods used in this study (including children's own analyses), children described friendship as their central concern, not popularity – in contrast to self-esteem scale content. Instead, children's descriptions focused on such aspects as emotional care, having fun and sharing activities and interests.

Finally, it was found that many aspects of the active and social self-concept that children described as very important are absent from most self-esteem scales. These include parents, siblings, extended family and pets for the social self, and non-team physical activities, creative activities and other activities (e.g. using media and reading for pleasure) for the active self.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

- 1. The self-concept is a complex interconnected hierarchy.** Psychological researchers have proposed many different ways to envisage the self-concept. It has been described, for example, as a hierarchy, as a web of interconnections or as a set of distinct factors. The findings of this study suggest that the self-concept consists of a set of factors which, although hierarchical, are not distinct since they are interconnected in multiple ways.
 - » **A hierarchy.** The findings of this study indicate a hierarchy for the self factors explored, but a different hierarchy than that proposed by some self-concept and self-esteem researchers. Across methods, family proved most salient (particularly parents and then siblings), followed by friends. After these social factors, the physically active self (encompassing a wide range of ways of being physically active) was most salient to children in this study.
 - » **Interconnections.** Children's active and social selves were found to be interwoven on multiple levels. For example, children's favoured activities often primarily involved being social, and by the same token, their social selves were often defined by shared activities and interests. In addition, children associated many social meanings with their salient activities. This perspective stands in contrast to many self-esteem scale authors, who consider that the self domains they measure are conceptually and psychometrically distinct.
- 2. Being social and having fun are central to children's selves.** The hierarchy and interconnections were also seen in the two core sets of meanings that children associated with their active and social selves. These meanings were being social and having fun.
 - » **Being social.** The central social relationships in children's selves have been outlined above. In addition, children often described their active selves as salient for social reasons, encompassing friends, family members and family identity. For many, activities were meaningful because of the friendships associated with them, because they conferred time with favoured family members, or

because they provided a sense of connection, or family identity, with members of the immediate or extended family who also engaged in such activities. As a result, it appears that even when a non-social dimension of the self is being researched, it may contain many social components. These findings reflect one of the fundamental paradoxes of the self, which has been noted by many theoreticians: even though it is an inherently personal, individual experience, at the same time it is social in its creation and expression.

- » **Having fun.** A striking finding in this study was the centrality of fun in children's descriptions – a topic rarely discussed in relation to children's self-concept and self-esteem. 'Fun' appears to be a multifaceted, core construct that applies to almost all aspects of children's selves – from their relationships with friends, family and pets to almost all their favoured activities. It is possible that 'fun' reflects relationships and activities where children are intrinsically motivated; if so, it may be linked to self-esteem.

3. The self-concept is highly individual. It should be noted that the findings summarised in this briefing note are based on analyses conducted across the whole group of participating children. However, a feature of the study was a great deal of individual variation in how much children valued certain self factors. For example, for one child, going fishing with Dad might be a favourite activity, one with a particular set of associated meanings. For another child, it could be playing camogie or playing with a pet lizard or writing stories (or one of many other activities). Children's social self factors and their meanings also varied. It should therefore be borne in mind that while certain conclusions can be suggested for children as a whole, each child's particular set of self factors, their relative values and their associated meanings were highly individual.

4. Implications for self-esteem. Self-esteem is widely invoked in Western societies, including Ireland, in many arenas such as mental health, education, developmental research and the media. While this gives the impression of a well-defined, clearly understood construct, the findings and conclusions of this study raise questions about the validity of the construct where it is based on widely used self-esteem scales for children. They suggest that self-esteem scales are, at best, only partially valid in terms of their content.

- » The findings indicate that many aspects of children's selves which they consider salient are omitted from self-esteem scales, whether this refers to self factors such as parents, siblings and friendship, or to meanings such as social connections or fun.
- » The findings also suggest that self-esteem scales may be skewed towards measuring children's self-esteem in a school-based, ability-oriented context. This suggests the possibility that adult researchers have construed children's self-esteem needs for this context alone, rather than more holistically, and have failed to incorporate children's perspectives.

6. What are the recommendations?

A number of recommendations arise from the research, as follows:

1. Central recommendation for research with children

The findings of this study suggest that adults should not rely solely on their own expertise when defining the parameters for research with children. Children's self-concept and self-esteem would be better researched using categories considered salient by children themselves.

2. Recommendation for self-esteem researchers, clinicians and others interested in self-esteem

It is recommended that researchers and clinicians should be cautious in drawing inferences from research with self-esteem scales. The study suggests that salient social and active self domains are missing from standardised self-esteem scales and that the content of existing scale domains only partially reflects the meanings that are salient to children. If considering the use of self-esteem scales, researchers should recognise the complexity of children's selves and examine the content and psychometric properties of any scales they choose to use with the greatest care.

3. Recommendation for children's physical activity

There is currently considerable interest in optimising children's health and activity levels. In this context, it should be noted that being physically active was the most salient form of activity to the children in this study. However, many children cited being physically active in ways that did not involve team sports, and this was disproportionately the case for girls. Therefore, opportunities for both school- and community-based forms of physical activity other than team sports should be developed in consultation with children. These should be activities such as many forms of dance, other individual sports such as martial arts, and other more peer-based forms of activity such as skate-boarding.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

The principal benefit of this study is the broader, deeper and clearer picture of children's active and social selves which it has provided. In particular, this encompasses the meanings that children themselves associated with their core active and social selves, meanings that have rarely been researched. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that using a diverse set of methods was a fruitful means of engaging children and illuminating different facets of their selves. The findings also indicate that by respecting children's views and by inviting them to contribute their perspectives in diverse and meaningful ways, adults' understanding of a complex construct, such as the self, can be greatly increased.



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