

**CHARACTERISTICS AND DETERMINING FACTORS
OF ADOLESCENT SELF-ESTEEM ON THE BASIS OF
POLL SURVEYS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL
STUDENTS**

Theses of PhD dissertation

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2002

Theses of the Ph.D. dissertation titled
Characteristics and determining factors of adolescent
self-esteem on the basis of poll surveys among
secondary school students

Problem presentation

Adolescence is a life period receiving special attention, both in positive and negative aspects, in most cultures. Changes taking place during this period are of outstanding importance both from the aspect of the society and of personal lives. The age of adolescence, both in its theoretical visualization and in practical research, gained ground, proportional to its weight, in the professional literature of psychology.

The issue of adolescent identity was globally addressed by the psychosocial development theory of Erikson. The theory divides the development from birth to death into eight stages. Within this sequence, the fifth stage represents adolescence (between ages of 12-19 years), when the main task is to form identity. Identity, according to Erikson, means the concept of self-identity: a coherent concept about ourselves, with the sense of continuity also present. We establish a link between our childhood years and our anticipated future, but also between our ideas about ourselves and the image we believe others may picture us and what we should be according to the expectation of others. This identity, however, does not comply with the summarized version of our childhood identities. As children, we yet wanted to become that what adults important to us (mostly our parents) wanted us to become. Adolescence identity is formed through crises solvable only if we already identify with the values and expectations of our peer group and of adults, outside of the family, we can consider as our leaders. The series of crises is started with bodily changes at the onset of puberty.

The bodily and cognitive changes of frenetic velocity, the fact of sexual maturation unavoidably questions childhood self-identity not only in the adolescent himself, but it cannot remain unrevealed either for his environment. It formulates new expectations and provides new possibilities for the adolescent. The reactions given to these challenges is

the first independently, actively and consciously formed identity. The momentum of the interaction between maturation and the environment can be, in principle, detected already at this stage: maturation cause new potentials and capabilities to emerge in the individual, and the environment, reacting to these changes, will confront him with new, so far unknown challenges. These challenges are important, because while one struggles with them, also solves the developmental task presented to him in the given stage. If the environment confronts the adolescent with the proper challenges in time and helps in their solution, also promotes psychosocial development. Nonetheless, it can also harm, by several means: if does not confront with challenges due to a concept of ill-grounded protection, if confronts with these challenges too early, if challenges are exaggerated, or if it does not provide proper help in their solution.

Following the theory of Erikson and using semi-structured interviews, Marcia et. al. identified identity types at end of adolescence. Two key concepts were used in their characterization: the concepts of *crisis* (termed later as *exploration level*) and *commitment*.

Crisis means that the subject attempts to thoroughly analyze questions considered important personally by him, or sharply presented by his actual situation. Thus, he discovers problems, and collects and analyzes relevant information while seeking for alternative solutions. The period of crisis involves increased tension exactly due to confrontations with the problems. The adolescent compares the unveiled possibilities, and tries, to a certain extent, how feasible are these revenues for him. The choice of profession can be mentioned as an example, as a question of both situational and personal importance. The environment expects the adolescent to chose a work topic or occupation he intends to be involved in, and to take necessary steps to become capable of responsible and successful work in that area. It may become an issue of personal significance for the adolescent, what professional activity would give him the greatest chance to evolve his capabilities, achieve his desires, and to carry out sensible work in his adult life.

Commitment means that the subject permanently undertakes certain modes of problem solving, and makes efforts to accomplish these. Chosen solutions may be ones he himself invents as a result of crisis, or choices, methods adapted from others i.e., parents or a reference group. In latter case, the individual avoids the tension of being confronted with problems,

and solutions based on the experience of others are used. Using the above example, the adolescent may collect information from several occupations, and tries himself, as possible, in these. In this process, he is confronted with his own limits, the opinion of others about his attempts, the barriers of the possibilities, i.e. with the uncertainty caused by the numerous alternatives to be chosen. By the end of the crisis, the occupation of his choice, for which he can make an honest commitment, clarifies. It may also happen, however, that he does not consider the choice of occupation a problem, for which he is supposed to seek for a solution, but accepts nearly without thinking the profession suggested to him by his parents or chosen by his friends by themselves. He then commits himself with this choice, meaning that he makes all efforts to become capable for successful activity in the area chosen for him by others.

There are four states of identity identified using the concepts of crisis and commitment:

- In *diffusion* the subject has not gone through crisis and has not committed himself (a certain rate of crisis may have been experienced, but a solution has not been reached, and the person left from the crisis state)
- In *foreclosure*, although the subject has committed with certain decisions, means of solution, yet a crisis has not been experienced, i.e. a decision has been reached not from his own experience, but by the decision-making of others
- In *moratorium* the subject is just experiencing crisis, and no commitment has yet been reached for any solution
- In *identity achievement*, which may follow the state of moratorium, the crisis period resulted in choices, decisions to which the person has committed himself

Berzonsky formulated a model unambiguously focusing on the process of identity formation. With the aid of his questionnaire (the Identity Style Inventory) he specified differences in information processing, and identified three different styles. The term of identity style refers to the mode of information acquisition, processing and utilization leading to identity and self-concept. These three styles are characterized as listed below:

- **Diffuse/avoidant style**

Unwilling to be confronted with personal problems, also reluctant to make decisions, therefore, attempts to avoid or at least delay to deal with issues of personal relevance. Behavior is determined by the actual situation, the attitude is hedonic. Creates ad hoc theories.

- **Normative style**

Follows the expectations, directions of persons, groups in the processing of his experiences. Not open to information inconsistent with his personal values or deeds. If reality contradicts with the normative expectations, employs defensive mechanisms to reduce tension. Creates dogmatic theories.

- **Information-oriented style**

The attitude is introspective, information of personal relevance for decisions or solutions regarding identity are actively sought, processed and utilized. Open to all strategies of problem solving. Before decision-making, thoroughly examines these alternatives. Creates scientific theories.

Given identity styles belong to different types of identity: diffuse/avoidant style is characteristic to diffusion, normative style to foreclosure, while information-oriented style to both moratorium and identity achievement.

In addition to theories and fundamental research revealing identity, the empirical and theoretical direction assessing the changes in adolescent self-esteem is also of high significance. According to Harter, the well-developed cognitive abilities of the adolescent affect self-esteem not only positively, but also negatively. Negative effects emerge in emotional problems, and may cause depression and high level of anxiety. He describes four self-concept alterations of emotional risk:

- The *self-concept becomes more abstract* during adolescence. This alteration is due to the incursion of formal operational thinking. At the beginning of the period, the adolescent describes himself in his self-characterization with factual concepts (i.e. physical characteristics, simple emotions, group membership, gender, family roles, etc.), and the correctness of these facts is easily

verifiable. In the middle of adolescence, he already mentions internal, unverifiable, sometimes complex, hardly tangible characteristics of his ego, e.g. complex emotions (often feels embarrassed or his emotions are depressive, etc.) and characteristics (i.e. attentive, compassionate, courageous, etc.). The majority of adolescents form a realistic self-concept, yet certain individuals reach a completely fallacious image (This issue is further addressed below.)

- The *self-concept becomes more differentiated* during adolescence, adolescents define themselves by much more roles than in childhood. The adolescent views himself different in all his roles: his behavior is completely different with his parents than with his friends or siblings, etc., different characteristics come to the front, and this bothers the adolescent. He feels he has to find his real face within this diversity, and understands only by his adulthood that he cannot be identical in all his roles and relations, as versatility is called for by these roles themselves: it would not be proper to relate to all people in a completely uniform manner. At the age of 14-15 the adolescent worries much due to the inconsistencies of his self-concept.
- The *ideal self undergoes great and frequent changes* in this period. This development is made possible by the ability to hypothetical thinking. It is a risk factor if the concepts of the real and the ideal self-concepts get too far from each other, because this may easily result in depression, infelicity and disappointment.
- The adolescent *becomes more introspective*, focuses mostly to his internal events. He is occupied with the question, who is he indeed, and how is he being seen by others. He often is incapable to separate his own thoughts about himself from the opinions of others about him. At other times, he feels no one can see his real identity, only he himself may only have an accurate view on this.

The aim of our survey was to examine controversies of special emphasis in the professional literature, related to adolescent identity caused by the rapid and tremendous bodily changes; by the simultaneously emerging and urging role expectations often contradicting with each other;

by difficulties in self-assertion and –presentation; by fear from exclusion, and by differences between external appreciation and self-perception. Our particular interest was to detect successful and less successful strategies developed by adolescents in order to resolve tension resulting from these controversies.

Fundamentally, psychology offers two strategies for such situations. One operates through manipulating self-emotions, and aims to immediately reduce tension (see: emotion-oriented coping with difficulties, avoiding mechanisms, reduction of dissonance). The other is to face tension, find out causes and relationships aiming to long-term reduction of tension (problem-oriented coping with difficulties, elaboration, information-oriented style, uncertainty orientation). It is emphasized that people employ both strategies, yet there exist certain preferences in this respect: dogmatic, introverted and prejudiced individuals prefer emotions manipulation.

We have attempted to explore the strategies adolescents may use to overcome the uncertainty resulting from the contradictions of their self-concept. It is by all means inferential that the stormy presence of these uncertainties and contradictions may temporarily interfere with self-evaluation, and questions faith in self-values.

Although these strategies were not directly studied, the characteristics analyzed allow implications to their use. This issue is considered important because we believe these strategies are related to various identity states and to the corresponding information processing tendencies, and thus, may contribute to our knowledge on identity formation.

According to the literature of the psychology of decision-making, uncertainty necessarily results in anxiety, which is, to most people, difficult to tolerate. Several methods can be utilized to reduce uncertainty:

- *Repression* (ignore, refuse to accept uncertainty)
- *Rationalization* (the problem causing uncertainty is diverted solely to the cognitive level, and tension is attempted to be eliminated by rational arguments, while emotional factors are being ignored)
- *Elaboration* of problems causing uncertainty i.e.,
 - emotional frustration caused by uncertainty is

- not concealed from ourselves
- the problem is attempted to be faced and solved in spite of the emotional burden it causes

The adolescent may chose from the above listed emotion- and problem-oriented solutions. It was assumed that if the adolescent chooses repression, uncertainty is avoided and self-esteem is not lowered.

Literature data indicate that gender-related differences are worth studying. According to Harter (1992) boys perceive less contradicting factors within their self-concept, and therefore, their self-esteem remains less disturbed. Various defensive mechanisms may be assumed as a background for this phenomenon. Because socialization does not help boys to acquire strategies to deal with frustration-generating emotions, they chose rationalization, and thus, may avoid considering emotions. The emergence of rationalization is favored also by the fact that during socialization boys are directed to trust in rational (or rationalized) arguments. It is also possible, however, that certain individuals chose repression, i.e. do not acknowledge the presence of contradicting elements in their self-concept, and therefore, their self-esteem may remain relatively high.

Hypotheses

I. Hypotheses related to consequences of inconsistencies of the adolescent self-concept:

1. The inconsistency of the self-concept lowers self-esteem at the middle of adolescence (self-esteem is lower at the middle than at the beginning of adolescence)
2. Self-esteem again improves at the end of the period, because the inherent conflicts of self-concept decrease (self-esteem is higher at the end than at the middle of adolescence)
3. Caused by the frustration due to conflicting elements of the self-esteem, the level of anxiety of the adolescent is higher at the middle than at the end of adolescence

4. The score at the self-monitoring scale is higher at the middle than at the end of adolescence, because one of the functions of good self-monitoring is to help to manipulate the impression made on others. This may be needed by the adolescent to conceal his/her conflicting self-concept.

II. Gender-related hypotheses:

5. The self-esteem of boys is higher at all stages of adolescence than that of girls
6. Boys report lower anxiety levels than girls

III. Hypotheses related to methodology:

7. The concepts of the creation of imaginary audience, self-monitoring ability and approval motive (although all three refer to the personal importance of the social medium) do not designate identical social tendencies. Although the above-mentioned concepts are obviously not identical, the professional literature yet does not contain results that would clarify their relationships on the basis of experimental analysis and not solely by speculative means. Our second survey addressed this very task.

IV. Hypotheses related to the presence of strategies:

8. There exists a group of high self-esteem with at the most medium anxiety level. It is assumed that the simultaneous presence of these two conditions may be achieved by rationalization
9. There exists a group that chooses to face uncertainty, makes efforts to overcome it, and is characterized by medium anxiety level and curiosity. It is assumed that the simultaneous presence of these three conditions may be achieved by elaboration

10. There exists a group that chooses to face uncertainty, makes no effort to overcome it, and is characterized by high anxiety level and curiosity. It is assumed that this group utilizes a strategy different from the above-mentioned ones: seeks for social support

Research methods

To check our hypotheses, two questionnaire-based surveys have been carried out.

Survey #1 aimed to acquire knowledge, on one hand, on the structural relationships of the adolescent self-concept and on the changes of its self-evaluating characteristics, and on the other hand, on the resulting tensions and on the abilities and strategies that may help in managing uncertainty related to adolescence.

Survey #2 aimed to check the methodological hypothesis: the conceptual differentiation among the three characteristics of social relevance was attempted to be supported by empirical data.

Both surveys were carried out on a sample of secondary school adolescents, and an identical age-group breakdown was used for data-processing. The sole measuring tool used in both surveys was the Self-Perception Profile, the results of which were analyzed separately by each survey and combined in both surveys too.

Survey #1 relied on the below measuring tools:

- Self-Perception Profile (the questionnaire was created specifically for Survey #1, following the „Self-Perception Profile for Children” by Harter)
- Self-Control Schedule (SCS, Rosenbaum)
- Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder)
- STPI (Spielberger)
- Projective Protocol to Evaluate the Demand for Uncertainty Resolution (Fredrick, Sorrentino)

These questionnaires were filled out by 411 secondary school students, within the duration of a regular class (45 minutes).

Survey #2 contained the below questionnaires:

- Imaginary Audience Scale (Elkind, Bowen)
- Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder)
- Need for Social Approval Questionnaire (Crowne, Marlowe)

These questionnaires were filled out by 336 respondents within 45 minutes.

Summary

The results of the surveys are summarized below:

I. In the middle of adolescence, at the age of 16-17 years, the self-esteem of boys is lower in most areas than at the beginning of adolescence, but displays a definite rise by the end of the period. This trend is most likely caused by conflicting features emerging in the self-concept, and by the successive resolution of the inconsistency. Anxiety incidental to this process, remaining in all stages below the level seen for girls, severely decreases by the end of adolescence, indicating the cessation of emotional burdens. In the areas of global self-esteem (indicating general self-acceptance) and in social and sport competence (displaying the highest correlation with the global self-esteem), the self-esteem of boys was higher than that of girls.

II. The ability to do self-monitoring is highly strengthened in boys by the end of adolescence. According to the literature, this feature may be characterized two ways: (a) It may indicate that the controversies experienced in self-conflict have only been avoided or covered, but have not been thoroughly been elaborated. In this case the self-monitoring ability helps to hide these controversies from the peer group by manipulating the impressions made. (b) The other explanation considers that boys usually prefer more superficial, activity-oriented friendships involving numerous members of the peer group, where deep self-disclosure is improper. Self-monitoring ability may gain high importance in this medium, allowing to create

and maintain an image giving them popularity in this companionship.

III. In stress boys utilize the more intellectual strategies of learned resourcefulness: the control of negative thoughts and planned behavior. The strategy of control of negative thoughts may be interpreted both as suppression and rationalization, and may help in the reduction of the tension caused by inconsistencies of the self-concept. Planned behavior makes it possible to achieve good performance in spite of the temptations, anger or tension. Therefore, the higher self-esteem and lower tension level of boys may result from suppression, rationalization and planned behavior as well. It is possible that the group of boys is not uniform from the aspect, what events are in the background of high self-esteem with low tension level: certain individuals use defense by suppression or rationalization against uncertainty of adolescence crisis, while others achieve good results by planned behavior, simultaneously resist of the temptations of behaviors offering immediate rewards, and are able to control their impulses. Good results enforce their self-esteem and reduce their tension.

IV. In the areas of general self-acceptance, as well as in social and sport competence, the self-esteem of girls is lower than that of boys.. As compared to boys, the self-esteem of girls decreases in less areas in the middle of the period, but mostly reach its maximal value by the end of adolescence. This result may be explained with the fact that the contradictions of the self-concept of girls are already present at the age of 14-15 years. Girls are characterized by high anxiety level during the entire adolescence period, and it drops to the level of boys only in young adulthood (see the results of Oláh, 1987). It can be therefore concluded, in agreement with the professional literature, that girls worry about the controversies of their self-concept more than boys.

V. The ability to do self-monitoring is gradually decreasing in girls during adolescence. This is in agreement with the expectations stated in the literature (lacking actual results) regarding the changes in adolescent self-monitoring ability. As seen, this ability loses significance, assuming that girls, at the end of the period, prefer

honest self-disclosure and authentic manifestations. The concept of intimacy by Erikson indeed makes this ability and propensity responsible for the ability to create near and long-term relationships at the beginning of young adulthood. It is characteristic to girls that they play with only a few members of their peer group, but with these they attempt to create deep and exclusive relationships, which may help them to reach intimacy by the end of adolescence with individuals of the other gender as well.

VI. Significantly more girls were found in the narrow group of uncertainty-oriented individuals, and also in the group of individuals worrying about uncertainty but incapable of resolving it. The anxiety level of this latter group is the highest within the entire sample.

The intensive experience of uncertainty and the concomitant anxiety is a characteristic feature of adolescent crisis. Our results indicate that the state of crisis is characteristic to more girls than boys. The strategy of girls to overcome stress (as a tendency) is to deal with tension creating emotions – to create positive emotions and positive perspectives from learned resourcefulness. The strategy of emotion management particularly applies to uncertainty-oriented girls, who suffer less anxiety than others in their peer group, assumedly due to this strategy, indeed. It appears likely that this strategy makes the tension, concomitant of the attempts to resolve uncertainty, bearable. We believe, these experiments, aimed to achieve a deeper understanding of the relationships, provide further elaboration.

Adolescents (mostly girls), who take notice of uncertainty, but do not attempt to resolve it, typically seek social support. This may relate mostly to their parents, and to a lesser extent also to members of their peer group.

VII. By verifying our methodological hypothesis we differentiated among concepts of self-monitoring ability, creation of imaginary audience and approval motive – up to now this differentiation stood only on a speculative basis.

We intend to continue our studies on adolescent self-esteem and management strategies of the uncertainty related to the adolescent crisis.

For this purpose, we further improve our questionnaire designed to measure self-esteem, and attempt to gather data in sufficient volume to further study strategies to deal with frustrations due to uncertainties. Moreover, further analysis of the present data is also considered necessary. It would be of interest, for example, to compare scores of groups identified by learned resourcefulness-preferred strategies with corresponding score values from other questionnaires.