

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 094 025

UD 014 339

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TITLE Significant Others and Self-Perceptions of Disadvantaged Students.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (59th, Chicago, Illinois, April 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.75 HC-\$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Caucasian Students; Disadvantaged Youth; Economically Disadvantaged; Family Background; Negro Students; *Parent Attitudes; Puerto Ricans; *Secondary School Students; *Self Concept; Self Concept Tests; Self Esteem; Self Evaluation; *Social Differences; *Teacher Attitudes; Urban Youth

ABSTRACT

The study reported here investigated the various dimensions of actual and inferred self in comparison to the ratings of the subjects by supposed significant others. An inventory of 40 bi-polar traits used extensively in previous research was given to secondary school students to measure their self-concepts and their reflected selves--how they think their teachers rate them, their parents, and their classmates. The teachers and parents were given the same traits for rating the same adolescents. A sample of 120 students was randomly drawn from an urban area secondary school population. There was a minority composition of 36 percent blacks and 18 percent Puerto Ricans among the 60 disadvantaged youths. There was a white majority of 75 percent in the advantaged group. Both disadvantaged and advantaged students indicated positive self-concepts, with the disadvantaged having significantly higher self-concepts than the advantaged youths. For both groups of students, the level of reflected self seems to be a function of the self-concept. The parents' perceptions were very close to all the self-perceptions. The teachers' ratings were at a considerable distance; and even though the teachers rated both advantaged and disadvantaged students positively, the disadvantaged children were rated much lower than the advantaged children. (Author/JM)

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ED 094025

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Significant Others
and
Self-Perceptions
of
Disadvantaged Students

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Paper presented in symposium, "Integration and Social Policy," at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.

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Abstract

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In assessing the relative weight of parents and teachers as significant others upon adolescent self-perceptions, it was found that high congruence occurred among the self concept, reflected selves (parents, teachers, and classmates), and parents' ratings of both disadvantaged and advantaged students, but teachers' perceptions were at a considerable distance from all these. It was concluded that (1) how one views others' perceptions of him is a function of how he sees himself; (2) parents appear to be most highly placed on the hierarchy of significant others; and (3) the self that has been shaped in the early years of development is highly resistant to change by incompatible views of teachers in the later years of schooling.

Significant Others and Self-Perceptions

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The concept of self is partly forged out of the behavior of significant others toward the individual and the inferences he draws accordingly. Since these "significant others" form an integral part of an individual's world and are the primary agents of reinforcement, it is to be expected that they have greater impact upon the emergent self than those outside the individual's immediate social environment.

The individual's actual and perceived relationships with the important people in his world are far more crucial to the perceptions he holds of himself than either more material factors or the people who are outside his immediate life space. On the other hand, though it seems reasonable to assume that parents, other family members, peers, and teachers would constitute the core of "significant others," each of these would not necessarily have equal weight upon the individual's self concept. Unfortunately, previous research is inconclusive on this point. The research results of Coopersmith (1967) and Manis (1958) support the parents as essential to the level of self-regard. Brookover et al. (1964) and Morse (1964) stress the teacher's influence. When comparing teachers' ratings of students with the ratings of their parents (Soares & Soares, 1971b), it was found that the children's self-perceptions were extremely close to their parents ratings and to their own perception of parents' ratings. Interestingly enough, both groups indicated a corresponding increase after the students' achievement had improved--but both times at some variance with their teachers' ratings. An earlier study (Soares & Soares, 1970) also resulted in highly different perceptions of the self by students and by

their instructors; yet, the students--both disadvantaged and advantaged--perceived this differential.

Therefore, the present study was undertaken to add to the body of knowledge in this area by investigating the various dimensions of actual and inferred self in comparison to the ratings of the subjects by supposed significant others, especially in terms of students from different social settings.

Methodology

An inventory of 40 bi-polar traits used extensively in previous research (e.g., Soares & Soares, 1969, 1970-71, 1971a, 1972) was given to secondary school students to measure their self concepts (SC) and their reflected selves--how they think their teachers rate them (RSt), their parents (RSp), and their classmates (RSc). The teachers and parents were given the same traits--Teachers' Perceptions (TP) and Parents' Perceptions (PP)--for rating the same adolescents.

A sample of 120 students was randomly drawn from an urban area secondary school population. There was a minority composition of 36% blacks and 18% Puerto Ricans among the 60 disadvantaged youths. There was a white majority of 75% in the advantaged group. Disadvantage was determined from federal guidelines in terms of annual family income (less than \$4,000), living quarters (low-rent tenements or subsidized housing), and receipt of state aid or welfare funds. Advantage was indicated by a minimum of \$7,000 annual income with at least one adult in a steady job and living in one-family homes.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the results of the analysis. Significance occurred in favor of the disadvantaged on the SC, RSt, and RSp measures. The teacher's ratings were much higher for the advantaged students than for the disadvantaged.

The intragroup analyses indicated high convergence between the SC and the three RS measures for both the disadvantaged and advantaged. The parents'

ratings were highly similar to these four scores, though the teachers' ratings were not. The teachers' perceptions were much lower than the SC or the RS_t for the disadvantaged but significantly higher for the advantaged students.

Conclusions

First, consistent with much recent research, both disadvantaged and advantaged students indicated positive self concepts, with the disadvantaged having significantly higher self concepts than the advantaged youths.

Secondly, for both groups of students, the level of reflected self--the self as inferred from parents, teachers, and classmates--seems to be a function of the self concept. All four scores were highly similar for both the disadvantaged and advantaged, indicating the interdependence of the self and the perceptions that the individual believes others hold of him.

Third, the parents' perceptions were very close to all the self-perceptions. The teachers' ratings were at a considerable distance; and even though the teachers rated both advantaged and disadvantaged students positively, the disadvantaged children were rated much lower than the advantaged children.

It would seem that the mutuality of response and inference is internalized in the concept of self as primarily determined by parents. Evidently, the individual generally experiences greater symbiotic ties with parents than with teachers, which apparently continue into the adolescent years. It is quite probable that the evolved self concept has created a foundation of self-views that is highly resistant to others' views which may be inconsistent with that base. In other words, the individual may not assimilate those external perceptions which do not agree with the self-perceptions he already holds. Since the parents' views of him occur first and continue to reinforce intermittently the self-views that have already crystallized, the views of others would apparently play a secondary role in the shaping process of the self.

For this age group, as well as with younger pupils (eg., Soares & Soares, 1971a), teachers do not seem to fall so readily into the category of "significant others," as some researchers have maintained, at least not to the extent as parents. There is diminished contact between teachers and students at the secondary school level, and the interactions that do occur may stress the academic aspects of self-perceptions rather than the larger meanings of students as persons. In addition, perhaps a discrepancy exists between teachers' overt behaviors and the real attitudes towards their students which remain unrevealed for a variety of socially desirable reasons. These are necessary concerns for future research.

Table 1
 Comparison of Interpersonal Perception
 Mean Scores and Standard Deviations
 of Disadvantaged and Advantaged Adolescents

Dimension	Group				Intergroup Differences
	Disadvantaged		Advantaged		
	M	SD	M	SD	
(1) Self Concept	21.30	8.93	17.85	9.29	3.45*
(2) Reflected Self-Teachers	20.02	9.98	15.98	10.08	4.04*
(3) Teachers' Perceptions	12.56	11.20	21.48	10.29	-8.92***
(4) Reflected Self-Parents	21.11	10.90	17.10	10.75	4.01*
(5) Parents' Perceptions	21.17	9.60	18.13	9.03	3.04 n.s.
(6) Reflected Self-Classmates	20.75	11.07	17.24	10.37	3.51 n.s.
Differences (Inter-dimension)					
(1) & (2)	1.28 n.s.		1.87 n.s.		
(1) & (3)	8.74***		-3.63*		
(2) & (3)	7.46**		-5.50**		
(1) & (4)	.19 n.s.		.75 n.s.		
(1) & (5)	.13 n.s.		-.28 n.s.		
(4) & (5)	-.06 n.s.		-1.03 n.s.		
(1) & (6)	.55 n.s.		.61 n.s.		

N = 120

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

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