

Self-construals in Adolescence: Intersections of Gender and Streams of Education among High School Students in India

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Abstract: Self-concept (SC) refers to an individual's self-perceptions and is shaped by temperament, experiences with and interpretations of one's environment. This study aimed at investigating the differences in SC and its various dimensions (physical, social, educational, moral, intellectual, temperamental) among high school boys and girls studying in different academic streams. A sample of 218 high-school students (males=100, females=118) were recruited using purposive sampling. The sample belonged to 3 different streams of study (Science, Commerce and Humanities) and were administered the Self-Concept Questionnaire (Saraswat, 1984) to assess their global and domain-wise SC. Data was analyzed using SPSS 23. On performing 2 x 3 ANOVA and further Post-Hoc analysis, findings indicated that gender had a significant main effect on total ($p=0.04$), educational ($p=0.01$) and moral ($p=0.01$) SC. Girls obtained significantly higher scores on these as compared to boys. Results with respect to stream of study showed that Humanities students had significantly higher SC than Science students ($p=0.004$). Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: *Self-concept, gender, stream of study, adolescents, India*

Introduction

The term 'self' is generally used in reference to conscious reflection on one's own being or identity, as an object separate from others or from the environment (Huit, 2011). Self-concept is a person's self-perceptions shaped by experiences with and interpretations of one's environment. Positive self-concept has been seen to foster good outcomes in social relations, academics, mental and physical health (Craven & Marsh, 2008; Habeeb, 2016). The development of self is a lifelong process (Erikson, 1971), but childhood and adolescence are important periods for development of a positive self-concept.

Theoretical accounts have suggested that a large number of intersecting factors influence self-concept. These factors include both intra-personal and social influences such as children's temperament, parent-child interactions (Brown et al., 2009), friendships (Tarrant, MacKenzie, & Hewitt, 2006) and peer groups (Buhs, 2005; Zhenhong, Dejun, & Ping, 2004). Contextual factors such as gender and culture (Parkes, Schneider & Bochner, 2002) have also known to be important influences. Another influencing factor that seems to have received considerable attention in past literature is that of classroom - based experiences. Children's self-concepts can be critically shaped by classroom structures and teachers' control orientations (Marshall & Weinstein, 1984). Studies that have compared the effects of "unidimensional" and "multidimensional" classrooms (Rosenholtz & Rosenholtz, 1981) demonstrate this influence. Classrooms within which teachers emphasize a narrow range of students' abilities, group students as per their abilities and publicly evaluate performance are considered unidimensional. On the other hand, multidimensional classrooms, are those within which teachers focus on multiple types of ability (e.g., artistic as well as reading skills). Students have opportunities to work on a variety of different tasks using different materials and their

performance is evaluated more privately. Additionally, children studying in classrooms that support autonomy have higher perceptions of their cognitive competence, self-worth, and mastery motivation than children in classrooms where teachers exercise control (Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985). It has also been established that self-concept undergoes changes as children grow older. In a study that assessed self-concept among Spanish adolescents who were in the 5th and 8th grades, it was found that there were strong differences in the dimensions of self-concept during the school transition. Middle-school students, compared to elementary-school students, showed significantly lower levels in almost all dimensions of self-concept (Onetti, Fernández-García, & Castillo-Rodríguez, 2019).

Unlike the above-mentioned factors, the influence of gender on self-concept has created little consensus. It has been suggested that many of the observed differences in the behaviour of men and women can be explained by interpersonal differences in their self-concept (Cross & Madson, 1997). Children in their early developmental stages define themselves differently depending on their gender, with girls sharing a more social and group sense of themselves as compared to boys (McGuire & McGuire, 1988). Studies show that females have a better interdependent (Marcic & Grum, 2011) and total self-concept (Habeeb, 2016) as compared to males, proving to be more satisfied with themselves in relationships and the social environment. In an Indian study, Jani (2017) found a statistically significant difference in self-concept between males and females, with females obtaining higher scores. Saraswat (1982) also found relatively better self-concept among female students than male students. On the other hand Khan et al., (2015) and Haussler & Hoffman (2002) reported better self-concept among males. To further complicate the picture, there have also been studies finding no significant differences in the self-concept of males and females (Amirkhani et al., 2018).

Along with acknowledging developmental influences on self-concept, it may also be noted that as children grow, self-concept becomes increasingly differentiated into different domains such as social, physical and cognitive (including academic). From the perspective of educational psychology, academic self-concept is important to focus upon, because it facilitates a wide range of academic behaviours and outcomes (Marsh et al., 2011). School engagement and self-concepts are closely tied to students' economic success, long-term health and well-being. Prince and Nurius (2014) examined the role of academic self-concept in predicting school success over and above co-occurring contributors. They used stepped linear regression to understand the impact of positive academic self-concept on future educational aspirations, student GPA and accessing educational guidance counseling while controlling for factors like student socio-demographics. The findings confirmed hypotheses for each academic indicator, with the strongest coefficient being found for positive academic self-concept. In another study conducted in Sargodha district, Pakistan, Awan, Noreen and Naz (2011) examined achievement and its relationship with achievement motivation and self concept among students from four public and four private schools of the at the secondary level. The results indicated significant relationships between achievement motivation, self concept and academic achievement. Studies such as these have created interest in the benefits that positive self concept can create for children's decision making, planning, perseverance and accomplishments. Therefore educators have begun to embrace the goal of fostering positive and realistic self-concepts among children. Many educational policies, including the NEP 2020 have begun to emphasize self-concept enhancement as a primary goal of education.

Statistically significant differences have been observed in students' self-concept scores in different majors (Amirkhani et al., 2018) making it important to study the relationship between self-concept and stream of study. The Indian education system provides students the first opportunity to choose their stream of education in Grade 11. The choice a student makes at this point is seen as pivotal to their future career. The three broad streams offered to students at this stage include Humanities (Arts), Sciences and Commerce. Although the common perception is that Indian students, under the guidance of their parents, consider Science to be the most prestigious stream to pursue, data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020 says that Arts subjects are growing in popularity. The findings of the survey showed that 93.49 lakh students were enrolled in arts courses at the undergraduate level in India, making it the most popular. This is an indication that the educational landscape of the country might be shifting.

Given that research on self-concept within this changing landscape is sparse, the present study sought to compare self-concept among the students of the three main streams of study. Further given that literature on gender and self-concept appear

to convey ambiguous findings, the present study also sought to assess whether boys and girls showed any differences with respect to this variable. The limited number of studies done so far have shown differences in average self-concept scores of males and females as well as humanities and science students, where females scored higher and humanities students scored higher (Joshi & Pathani, 2017). This study hopes to shed more light on this issue, especially through a domain wise analysis. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in global self-concept and its various domains (physical, social, temperamental, educational, moral, intellectual) with respect to gender as well as the streams of study. It has been suggested that specific components of self-concept ought to possess greater predictive power regarding outcomes than a single, global component of self-concept. For example, research in education indicates that academic achievement is more correlated with academic self-concept than one's global self-concept. Further achievement in other domains should be correlated with the corresponding specific domains of self-concept (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Seaton, Marsh, & Craven, 2010).

Method

Sample

The sample recruited through convenience sampling consisted of 218 (M=100, F=118) high school students. The age range of the sample was 15-19 years (M=16.77, SD=0.86). They were students of 11th and 12th grade belonging to various streams of study (Science=69, Commerce=85, Humanities=64). The participants belonged to middle or upper middle-income families residing in Uttar Pradesh.

Design

An ex-post facto descriptive and quantitative design was followed in the present study. A standardized questionnaire (SCQ) was used for data collection, and self-concept scores were subsequently calculated. The final scores were classified into categories based on gender and stream of study as variables. Gender was classified as Male or Female and Stream of Study was classified into Science, Commerce or Humanities.

Measures

Demographic profile sheet: Used to collect preliminary information about the participants, it was circulated alongside the standardized tool. Details included name, stream of study, age, school name, gender.

Self-Concept Questionnaire: Developed by R.K. Saraswat (1984), this is a 48-item inventory to measure 6 separate dimensions of self-concept (Physical, Social, Intellectual, Moral, Educational and Temperamental) and total Self-concept. Each item provides 5 alternatives, ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree", each item being scored similarly. Higher scores indicate higher self-concept. There is no maximum time limit for responding to the items.

The maximum obtained score is 240 and minimum is 40. Reliability of the inventory has been established through the test-retest method and was found to be .91 for the total self-concept measure.

Procedure

Various school representatives in Uttar Pradesh were contacted for data collection. Consent from both school authorities and students was taken, and in-person group data collection was carried out. The instructions for the self-concept questionnaire were read out and students were assured that this was a psychological questionnaire and hence, there were no right or wrong answers. They were assured of anonymity of their responses, and it was ensured that data be used only for research purposes. Any queries regarding the questionnaire

were cleared up and henceforth, the data was collected in a time span of over an hour. The data was analyzed through SPSS 23. Seven 2-way 2x3 ANOVAs was performed to analyze the effect of gender and stream of study on participants' self-concept and subsequent self-concept dimensions.

Results

The independent variables for this study were Gender (male/female) having two levels (Male/Female) and Stream of Study (science/commerce/humanities) having 3 levels whose impact was studied on the dependent variables (Total SC, Physical SC, Social SC, Temperamental SC, Educational SC, Moral SC and Intellectual SC).

Table 2

Mean scores of Self Concept and its dimensions across Gender and Streams of Study

Measure	Gender				Stream of Study					
	Male		Female		Science		Commerce		Humanities	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Total SC	163.90	14.99	167.57	14.44	164.71	14.57	166.15	15.45	166.81	14.21
Physical SC	28.00	4.33	26.83	3.87	27.86	4.60	27.63	3.84	26.46	3.83
Social SC	29.29	4.36	30.02	3.60	29.69	3.77	29.77	3.94	29.56	4.28
Temperamental SC	27.78	4.78	28.38	3.59	28.46	4.11	28.14	4.79	27.68	3.32
Educational SC	24.38	5.37	26.22	4.99	23.85	5.18	25.61	5.34	26.71	4.81
Moral SC	28.59	3.94	29.91	3.29	28.73	3.97	29.17	3.84	30.09	2.87
Intellectual SC	25.90	3.46	26.16	3.53	26.10	3.49	25.81	3.37	26.28	3.70

7 two-way 2x3 between subjects ANOVAs were conducted to compare the effect of gender and stream of study on the self-concept of students. The post-hoc test conducted was the Tukey's HSD. The results indicated females to have higher total, educational and moral self-concept than males. No other differences were found with respect to gender. Further the Educational SC of Humanities students was significantly higher than that of the Science students.

Table 2

Univariate Analysis for Total Self Concept (SC)

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Gender	901.851	1	901.851	4.158	0.04*
Stream of Study	75.545	2	37.773	0.174	0.96
Gender XStream	618.522	2	309.26	1.426	0.66

Table 3
Univariate Analysis for Educational Self Concept

Predictor	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Gender	144.610	1	144.610	5.588	0.01*
Stream of Study	136.472	2	68.236	2.637	0.07
GenderXStream	97.233	2	48.616	1.879	0.15

Table 4
Post-Hoc Analysis between Streams of Study for Educational Self-Concept

Measure					
	(I)Stream	(J)Stream	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p
Educational SC	Commerce	Humanities	-1.10	.84	.38
		Science	1.75	.82	.08
	Humanities	Commerce	1.10	.84	.38
		Science	2.86	.88	0.004
	Science	Commerce	-1.75	.82	.86
		Humanities	2.86	.88	.004*

Table 5
Univariate Analysis for Moral Self-Concept

Source	SS	df	MS	F Value	P Value
Gender	81.42	1	81.42	6.31	0.01*
Stream of Study	14.16	2	7.08	0.54	0.57
GenderX Stream	43.54	2	21.77	1.68	0.18

Discussion

Self-concept (SC) in students has proven to play a significant role in the educational process, where an attitude of self-acceptance and respect develops when a child is accepted, approved, and liked by the ones around them (Chowdhury & Pati, 1997). Hence, SC serves as a basis for detailed understanding about the learning pattern of school students and their peer group adjustment levels. It can be an important tool in understanding emotional intelligence. Prior Indian research in SC has been uni-dimensional, although studies in the West have observed a consistent stream of findings documenting significant differences in domain specific areas of SC (Orth et al., 2021).

Gender and Self concept

The results of the present study indicate that males and female differ significantly in their total SC. The findings of the present study are not in line with those done in the past, wherein, males have a higher total self-concept than females (Ahad et al., 2016, Josephs et al., 1992; Jadav, 2019; Kumar, 2015, Halder & Datta, 2012). With respect to the results of this study, the reasons for why women may demonstrate higher self-concept within a highly patriarchal culture like India warrants further attention and necessitates a domain-wise analysis. The domain wise differences indicate that females obtained higher scores on educational and moral SC. The gender differences

found in the domain of educational SC may be understood by taking a closer look at the Indian education system. One of the reasons why females perceive themselves to be more capable as compared to males can be due to the way the education system has been designed. Starting from a very young age, children are taught that self-regulation plays a role in academic performance and this manifests in their grades for the coming future. Disciplinary skills like raising one's hand, waiting one's turn, listening to, and following teachers' instruction become an integral part of a student's assessment and hence, engrains itself into their learning experience as well.

Duckworth and Seligman (2006) found that girls edge out boys in total self-discipline and this contributes greatly to their better grades across all subjects. They found that girls are more adept at "reading test instructions before proceeding to the questions", "paying attention to the teacher rather than day-dreaming", "choosing homework over TV" and "persisting on long-term assignments despite boredom and frustration", hence girls embody self-discipline better in an academic setting as compared to boys. These behaviours end up being rewarded at school in the form of teacher praise, higher grades, and peer acceptance. This contributes to the learning process for girls and leads to a positive experience as compared to a negative one for boys where they are reprimanded for their lack of discipline. A positive experience for females further can then lead to a higher educational self-concept as compared to males.

Research surrounding morality has been ground for much debate and historically also been criticized for favouring males. However, measures of morality using empathy, guilt, altruism, and other helping behaviours indicate sex differences favouring females (Hoffman, 1984). Meta-analyses favour women in ethical attitudes (Borkowski & Ugras, 1998), holding business practices to higher ethical standards (Franke et al. 1997) and losing interest in jobs when asked to sacrifice ethical values (e.g.: honesty and loyalty) (Kray & Kennedy, 2014). Gilligan (1982) proposed that men and women utilize qualitatively different moral approaches. Women exhibit an ethic of care and solve ethical dilemmas by considering others' needs whereas men exhibit an ethic of justice and resolve ethical dilemmas by considering individual rights. Hence, the resultant moral identities differ, where women internalize moral traits in their identities more strongly than men. Additionally, differing self-construals that males and females hold have also been suggested to result in gender differences (Cross & Madson, 1997). Relationships being more central to women's identities than to men's, women define themselves as fundamentally interdependent and connected to others, meanwhile men define themselves as independent from others. This results in the tendency of women to describe themselves in more relational terms, experience more relationship-linked emotions and stay more attuned to such aspects. This relational need increases the importance of a stronger moral identity in females which helps individuals build and maintain

relationships. Hence, women are more likely to adopt goals and values that promote the welfare of others. Gradually, these goals and values translate into identifying strongly as a moral person and developing a relatively more positive moral self-concept. Upadhyaya (2015) revealed that females had higher moral judgement than males, similar results have been reported by Krebs and Gillmore (1982) and Turiel (1975). Zhang (2010) concluded that females' ethics were higher than males because in Chinese society there were higher moral standards and demands from women as compared to men, these findings could be generalised for the Indian society as well. Nonetheless it may be acknowledged that there were no gender differences in the other domains of SC measured- physical, social, temperamental, and intellectual. The lack of gender differences in Intellectual SC indicates that boys did not see themselves as less intelligent than girls. It is likely however that girls in India, have a more positive relationship with educational and curricular demands than boys do.

Stream of Education and Self-Concept

The findings with respect to stream of study were highly interesting. Once again, differences were found with respect to Educational SC with Science students holding a significantly less positive view of themselves than their corresponding Humanities and Commerce counterparts. Thus, students of Science appeared to have poorer views of themselves in relation to school, teachers, and extracurricular activities. In a country wherein Science and its corresponding professions such as Medicine and Engineering are concerned, these results appear to highlight a paradox. Science is usually taken up by the highest scoring students in school and thus, for these students to have low Educational SC appears at odds with commonly held ideas. The reasons for this may be fully known only through further investigation. However, some factors that could explain these results may be considered. Students who have a passion for the arts but perform well academically are pushed towards taking up Science purely due to their performance, with their interests put to the side. Further, since choice of subjects is dependent on good academic performance in the prior year, a stressful environment to maintain equally good, if not better grades is created for the student. If these circumstances lead to or cause reductions in lowered academic performance, then it can further discourage students, leading to frustration and a negative perception of their competencies.

Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

The National Education Policy 2020 (MHRD, 2020) has recognized and stated that streamlining of students into rigid narrow disciplines with early specialization has posed a problem in Indian students and hampered efficient learning. Hence, the Ministry of Education will work on disbanding streams and will instead encourage high quality multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning across all fields. This is likely to translate into more choices for students,

thereby reducing the pressure to enter a stream they may not feel ready for. It is clear that the pressure on students, particularly those in the Science stream needs to be reduced. This can be done through counseling not only students, but also their parents. It is also important to create awareness about appreciable career options offered by the Arts and Commerce streams, so that students can practise autonomy and chose these streams if they so desire.

The present study used quantitative analysis, but caution must be exercised when using the results to draw inferences. There might be extraneous variables at play which could not have been accounted for influencing the results. The Self-Concept Questionnaire was used to collect data, being a self-report measure the reliability of SCQ can be questioned. The present study depended on a single source of information which didn't allow for in-depth inquiry into the nature of the results. The sample in the present study was small (N=218) and the groups were of different sizes due to lack of availability on part of students, hence, the results might not be generalizable to the entire student population in India. Students in the study were predominantly of North-Indian origin, coming from a different cultural background and hence, inferences made on their scores might not be applicable across the country. Future research in this arena can focus on studying a larger sample and utilize multiple sources of data to increase reliability. Efforts can be made to bring in a qualitative component like interviews or focused group discussion for in-depth study and richer data.

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