



The relation between self-concept and social functioning in adolescence

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Abstract

A model of the relation between self-concept and internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours in adolescence, with the self-concept influencing problem behaviours ($S \rightarrow IE$), was assessed using a sample of 277 Swedish adolescents. The model was tested in a path analysis with data from Youth Self Report (YSR) and Structural Analysis of Social Behaviour (SASB) questionnaires. Consistent with the model, a positive self-concept was found to be the most important factor for adjustment and for protection against common problem behaviour. A negative self-concept combined with female gender were risk factors for internalized problems. Self-control had only a direct effect on externalizing behaviour for boys. Adolescents of 15, 16 years of age had a stronger relationship between a negative self-concept and externalizing problem behaviour than younger and older adolescents. Internalizing problem behaviours such as anxiety and depression predicted aggressive and delinquent behaviour. These findings highlight the importance of promoting of a positive self-concept in every adolescent in various psychosocial contexts.

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Introduction

Maladaptive behaviours and the self-concept are much in focus during the adolescent years. This is a developmental period characterized by at least some “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999) in

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which young people try to find answers to questions of identity and of what social behaviours are appropriate in different social contexts. Although the majority of adolescents move through the adolescent years with a positive view of themselves (Östgård-Ybrandt & Armelius, 2004) and without experiencing major difficulties, some do encounter psychological and behavioural problems (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Broberg et al., 2001). The most common adolescent behaviour problems have been categorized into two broad classes, internalizing and externalizing problems (Achenbach, 1991). Externalizing problems are characterized by “acting out” behaviours that are harmful and disruptive to others and include such things as delinquency and aggression. Internalizing problem behaviours include depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and withdrawn behaviour.

The self-concept is regarded as both risk factor influencing social functioning and problem behaviours in adolescence contributing to different kind of mental health problems (Marsh, Parada, & Ayotte, 2004) and protective factor that impede psychological problems and promotes general well-being (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000; Steinhausen & Metzke, 2001). A number of empirical studies have linked a negative self-concept to e.g. aggressive behaviour (Marsh, Parada, Yeung, & Healey, 2001; Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001), rule-breaking and delinquent behaviour, (DeSimone & Murray, 1994; Donellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Hay, 2000; van Welzenis, 1997), anxiety and depressive symptoms (Erkolahti, Ilonen, Saarijärvi, & Terho, 2003; Orbach, Mikulincer, Stein, & Cohen, 1998; Rätty, Larsson, Söderfelt, & Wilde Larsson, 2005) and eating problems (Humphrey, 1986; O’Dea, 2006). In this study is the self-concepts relative contribution to social functioning elucidated within a model with the self-concept as predictor of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours. In addition, the derived model was tested for adolescent boys and girls in different ages.

There is also a link between the self-concept and social behaviour in interpersonal theories (Leary, 1957; Sullivan, 1953) which relate the formation and the continued maintenance of the self-concept to social interpersonal behaviours. Sullivan (1953) found the self-concept (self-system) “central to the whole problem of personality disorder” (247pp.). Underlying all maladaptive behaviour was the person’s perception that he or she was unworthy and incompetent in interpersonal relationships. Modern interpersonal theory, for example Henry (2001), models how the self-concept, interpersonal perceptions, individual expectations, goals, wishes, and fears affect social behaviour. Interpersonal actions or reactions are thought to be complementary and bidirectional and to confirm the self-concept. According to Kiesler (1996), we communicate important self-definitional bids in attempts to influence others into reactions that confirm our definitions of ourselves and others.

A model that facilitates interpretation of the self-concept and is based on interpersonal (Sullivan, 1953) and attachment theory (Florsheim, Henry, & Benjamin, 1996) and consequently hypothesize a relation between the self-concept and social functioning is the Structural Analysis of Social Behaviour (SASB), developed by Benjamin (1974, 1987, 1996a, 1996b). The self-concept is seen as a product of interpersonal interactions (Benjamin, 1993) and is conceptualized in behavioural terms and expressed as a cognitive perception of the individual’s treatment of him- or herself (e.g., I like myself very much and welcome and enjoy opportunities to be by myself, I accuse and blame myself, make myself feel bad, guilty, ashamed, unworthy). This focus on the individual actions towards the self as an expression of the self-concept differ from the self-esteem

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