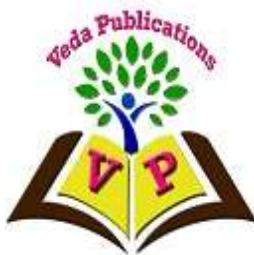


## DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE IN SELF-DESCRIPTIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BY AGE

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### ABSTRACT



The study sought to compare and contrast self-descriptions by people of different age or the developmental sequence in describing self. Literature has shown that there is a developmental sequence in the way people describe themselves. This was an experimental study involving interviews with two children aged 8 and 16 years. The two children were asked the same questions to describe self. The current study confirmed earlier findings that children's ability to describe themselves changed with age. The young child used physical characteristics more while the older child used more psychological characteristics and more complex language to describe themselves. Semi-structured interviews generated relatively reliable results though coding was difficult. The study concluded that pre-coded self-description questionnaires can enhance reliability and make coding and analysis easy. Though the results are reliable in terms of consistency with previous studies, they cannot be generalised due to the small sample size. Future studies should use a larger sample and same interviewer for consistency in questioning technique.

**Keywords:** *Literature, Children, Self-Description.*

## INTRODUCTION

William James (1892), made the first to attempt to develop an understanding of the self-concept by identifying two elements of the self- 'I' as subject and 'me' as object. Lewis (1990) called them the existential and categorical self respectively.

Charles Cooley (1902) stressed the importance of the social context (the looking glass self) in understanding self. His ideas were supported and expanded by George Mead (1934) who reported the importance of language and social interaction in the development of self-concept. Language provided the tool for describing self while interaction provided the social environment for information about the self (Miell & Ding, 2005).

Erikson (1968) introduced the developmental nature of self in his psychosocial identity theory. The theory explained how adolescents develop their identities and how communities influenced the way they view others and themselves (Erikson, 1968, Phoenix, 2005 p.244). More research was carried out on children's ability to describe self as described below.

Bannister and Agnew (1977) on the developmental sequence in children's ability to describe themselves reported their ability to distinguish themselves from others psychologically as they grew older. Young children were more able to differentiate themselves using physical features, activities and behaviours. Rosenberg (1979) researched on changes in self-perceptions over time using open ended interviews with individual children aged 8 to 18 years.

Questions focused on categorical aspects mainly. Responses were categorised into physical (P), character (C), relationships (R) and inner feelings (I). (The Open University, 2006). They concluded that young children described themselves in terms of objective and physical attributes while older children used conceptual terms. (Rosenberg citing Murphy, 1947, pp.505-6). The use of open-ended interviews on young children has been criticised as demanding and affecting reliability of the results ((Barrett, 2005). Harter (1983) reviewed several self-concept studies that used interviews and confirmed the developmental sequence in the way children described themselves.

In view of the above background the study sought to examine the developmental trends in self-descriptions by children of different ages. Consequently, the following research

question was asked: *Is there a difference in self-descriptions given by children of different ages?*

## METHOD

**Design:** The investigation used open-ended semi-structured interviews on (a) self-descriptions, (b) self-evaluations, (c) self and others, (d) ideal self and (e) self-knowledge to collect data for the research question: *Is there a difference between self-descriptions by children of different ages?*

**Participants:** Two female learners aged 8 and 16 participated in the interviews conducted by two different lecturers.

**Materials:** A self-description completion sheet to write responses to the question: ‘Who am I?’ A tape recorder was on hand to record the interviews. Recording and analysis sheets were also prepared for presentation of participants’ responses. (See Appendices 3 & 4).

**Procedure:** Interviewers introduced themselves. Objective of the interview, how it was going to be carried out, its purpose and use of the results and how the data was going to be collected were stated. Participants were informed that interviews would be recorded and that there were no right or wrong answers. Addressing these issues is evidence that the researchers made an effort to fulfil the BPS requirements on ethical issues when conducting research with children and young people. (The Open University, 2006). However, no mention was made of parental consent. Questions asked addressed the following issues about the self: self-descriptions (who am I?), self-evaluation (best and weak points about self), self and others (relationships-how different or similar to others, ideal self (type of person they would like to become) and finally locus of self-knowledge (how much they trust themselves). (See Appendix 1 & 2). For self-descriptions, participants had to begin their responses by writing, ‘I...’ ten statements were expected. Interviewer for the 16-year old made clear that the respondent could write plus or minus ten statements, one per sentence. The other did not. The tape recorder was stopped while participants were writing. Written statements formed the basis of interviews as the interviewers sought amplification of the responses. Both interviewers made use of probing questions extensively to get more information about the self. However, interviewer for the young used lengthy probes because initial questions were too long and unclear. (See Appendix 1). Both asked supplementary questions about relationships, ideal self, self-evaluation and self-knowledge. Interviews for the young and older child lasted 19.41 and

23.47 minutes respectively. Responses were then coded individually on the basis of Rosenberg *et al* scheme, that is, physical (P), character (C), Relationships (R) and Inner feelings (I). Responses were then analysed by category, total and reduced to a percentage each and a bar graph (See Appendices 3 & 4, Table 1, Figure 1).

## RESULTS

The following is a summary of the comparative responses from the study.

**Self-descriptions:** Quantitative and qualitative evidence showed that the young and older child described themselves using all of Rosenberg's categories generally. The young gave more emphasis on physical compared to psychological characteristics by the older child. (See Appendices 3 & 4, Figure 1, Table 1).

**Self-evaluation:** Both referred to relationships '...lots of friends' [9.18], '...ability to get along with a lot of people.' [15.08] The young child's weaknesses were physical aspects like hurting ears, ear infection while the older referred to character when she said, 'I get offended easily..., 'lack confidence....'[15.44]

**Self and others:** The young and older gave different responses to the question on similarities and differences to others of same age. For example, the young stated preferences-liking or not liking maths while the older stated emotions associated with preparing for GCSEs- pressure and stress as main similarities. Relationships ('...don't fit with same group...), [16.47] physical and psychological (...more mature ...not all things are funny or cool) [16.47] were the older child's weaknesses.

**Ideal self:** On future aspirations, the younger and older differed in their responses. The younger child mentioned physical aspects like being an actress, archaeologist, having kids, paying bills etc. while the older child mentioned conceptual and value aspects of the self. For example, '...being more secure in life, reflecting on achieved goals, gaining more confidence, move for better things and sever links with the past. [19.16]

**Locus of self-knowledge (knowledge of self):** Both young and older children demonstrated self-knowledge on academic ability by expressing that their own, and their mums' judgements would be right. However, they differed on behaviour. The young would go by mum's judgement while the older child would respect hers, and her mums' ('...mum being right from her own perspective while she will be right as well ...we see in different ways.'). [21.16]

## DISCUSSION

Overall quantitative and qualitative results of the study showed that the young and older children were different in the manner and terms in which they described self. The young focussed more on physical and less on character and inner feelings. For example, 'I like doing Harry Potter', 'I love rabbits...' while the older child referred to more psychological and less on character, relationships - conceptual, abstract concepts of self. For example, 'I've always been an individual,' 'I can only be me,' 'I am pretty plain', 'I'm friendly' etc. (Appendices 3 & 4). Such statements reflect inner feelings than overt. This is in agreement with Bannister and Agnew (1977), Harter (1983) and Rosenberg (1979) on the developmental sequence in emphasis but not categories namely, more psychological as they grow older. Failure to mention relationships by the young child may be a reflection of inadequate social interaction or lack of appreciation of others for self development. The older child stated the relationships very clearly in response to self-descriptions and supplementary questions. At the age of 16 she had gained enough social experience to project herself in relation to others unlike the younger child (Mead, 1934 p.135).

On self-evaluation: The young child showed ignorance about the meaning of 'best about you' and 'strong points'. This was compounded by poor questions and questioning technique. For example, '... what would you say your best points are? If someone said what are the things that are best about you, about being you?' [7.57] This contrasts with a question to the older child which was more precise: 'What are the best things about you, what are the things you're most proud of?' [14.51] Responses were clear, precise referring to character, - good relations with others, get offended easily, lack of confidence. This confirms the importance of language and interaction in expressing and understanding self (Cooley 1902, Mead, 1934).

On ideal self, the young once again referred to physical aspects such as being an actress or archaeologist, paying bills etc. This may be a reflection of inadequate understanding of the question or inadequate language facility. The older child gave a psychological response with a deeper meaning-security in life, gaining confidence and a complete change from the past. Responses showed clear influence of others on self which agrees with Cooley (1902) on 'the looking glass self-concept'.

On relationships, the young child focussed on interests for both similarities and differences. The older child referred to emotional, relationships and inner feelings as factors responsible for similarities and differences-more mature, relationships that are discriminatory association with different people allows different feelings...'). Being older she may have had a better understanding of self in relation to others. Language skills enhanced her self expression. This once again confirms developmental sequence in self-descriptions. (Agnew & Bannister, 1977, Rosenberg, 1979, Harter, 1983).

Responses to self-knowledge questions showed little difference between the young and the old. Both appear to respect their own and others' judgements on academic issues. However, they were in agreement on behaviour as both thought their mums' judgements would be right due to differences in perception. The older child respected the differences but still stood by her own judgement while the young fully endorsed her mum's. The latter demonstrated that she had inadequate understanding of self or it was a matter of respect for mum. Perceptions on behaviour are highly subjective. The judgement by the perceiver is important and does not necessarily reflect lack of self-knowledge.

The study used semi-structured open ended questions. These have been described as demanding for young children (Barrett, 2005, The Open University, 2006). Writing five instead of ten statements and many probing on one issue might be evidence of excessive demands of open-ended questions for the young child. This may have affected the reliability of responses of the younger child. Interviewer for the young child was very vague and verbose hence the responses got were not very precise and at times probes were lengthy while precise and clear for the older. Use of objective statements for participants to select those best describing their physical, character, relationships and inner feelings would have been easier for respondents and for analysis purposes. Without checking with one or more persons, my categorisation might be faulty affecting the reliability of the results.

Participants generated material for interview questions from their written and oral responses hence the research was ecologically valid. Internal and external validity were militated against by poor questioning for the young child and the small sample respectively. On the whole results are consistent with earlier research hence reliable. Future research should use a larger sample for both ages using a pre-coded self-description scale.

## CONCLUSION

Literature has shown that there was a developmental sequence in the way people describe themselves. The study confirmed earlier findings that children's ability to describe themselves changes with age in terms of complexity but both covered all categories. Pre-coded self-description questionnaires will be easy to complete and analyse and help to enhance reliability. Though the results are reliable, they cannot be generalised due to the small sample size.

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**APPENDIX 1****Interview questions by Kieron Sheehy to Annie (8 years)**

1. Who am I? (0.39)
2. Tell me about this one. (0.56)
3. I love rabbits... Is that important to you? (3.36)
4. But you are really good at maths? (5.44)
5. I'm not good at remembering...is that an important thing?...tell me about your remembering. (6.56)
6. What would you say your best points are then? If someone said what are the things that are best about you, about being you? What about your weaker points. Things you are not quite so proud of or...? (7.57)
7. Tell me ways in which you're the same as people who are the same age as you? (11.14)
8. Can you think of ways in which you're different to people who are same, well, most people the same age as you,...a way which you're different to other people. (12.38)
9. What kind of person would you like to be when you are older? (13.31)
10. So who knows you best do you think? (15.30)
11. '...How are doing in maths?' and you tell me one thing...I asked your mum...How's doing at maths? And you said a different, they said a different, you said, both said different things, you said one thing and she said another. who'd be right? (15.40).

**APPENDIX 2****Interview questions by Peter Barnes to Kirsty (16 years)**

1. Who am I? (1.23)
2. Tell me a bit more about what you mean.
3. How would you describe...? (3.26)
4. What does that mean for you? (4.41)
5. Size eight? (6.05)
6. Tell me more about that? (6.56)
7. I get on well with many people? (9.05)...and that's important to you? (9.13)
8. What are the best things about you, what are the things that you're proud of, what would your answer be? (14.51).
9. In what ways do you feel that you are the same as most people of your age, of the people that you know? (16.17)
10. In what ways do you feel that you're different from other people, your sort of age? (16.41)
11. If I was talking about you to your friends... would they give me a different picture of you...if so in what way? (18.20)
12. What kind of person would you like to be when you're older? (18.44)
- 13...if I asked you a question 'Are you well behaved at home?' and I asked your mum the same question and she gave me a different answer to you, who would be right? (21.03)  
etc.



**APPENDIX 3****ANNIE' SELF-DESCRIPTION CATEGORY ANALYSIS FORM: (8 years)**

KEY: P=Physical, C=Character, R=Relationship, I= Inner qualities

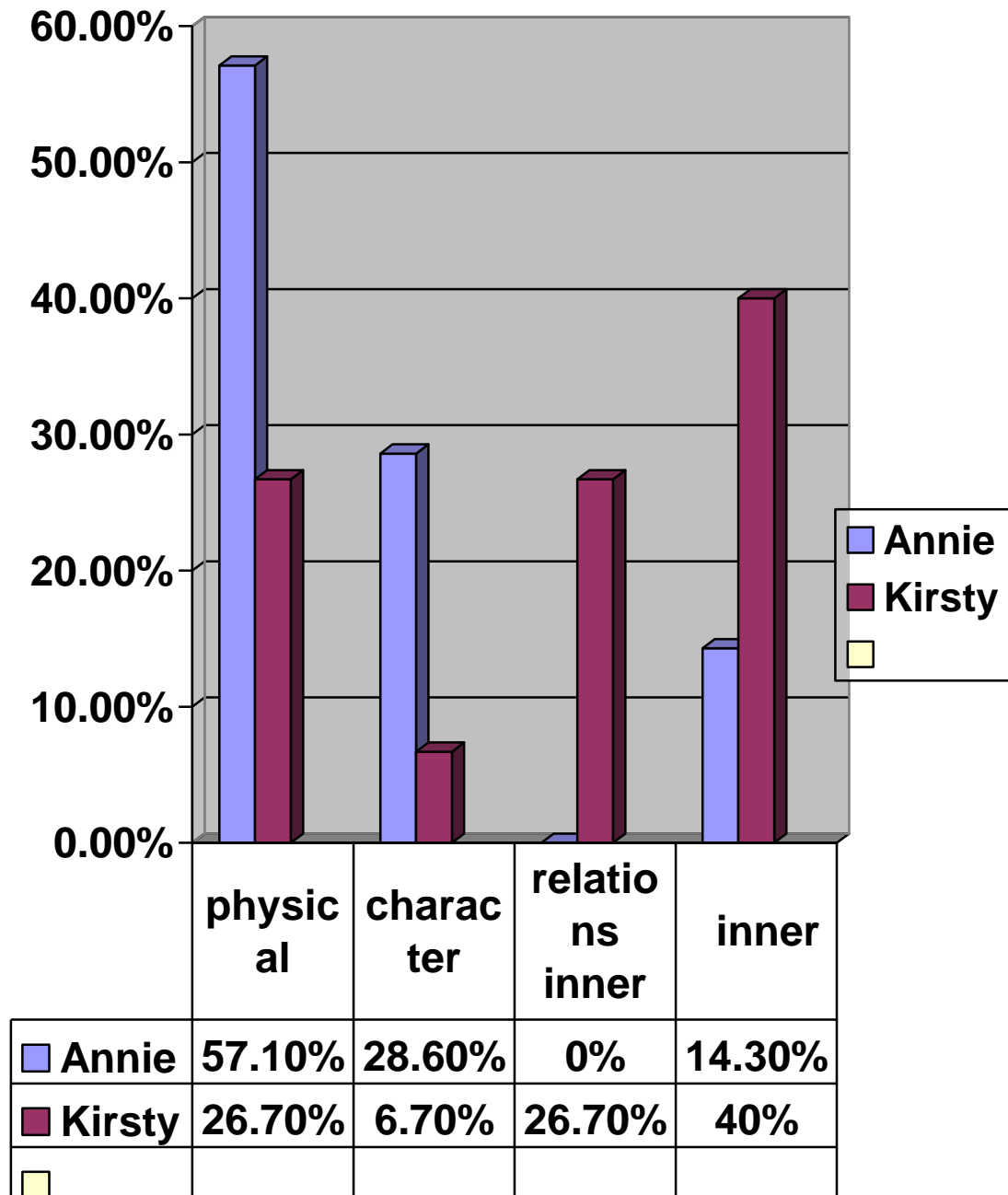
P	C	R	I	Participant: Annie (8 years: Sex: Female)
X				I like doing Harry Potter Lego.
X				I've completed the Night Bus.
X				I love rabbits, guinea pigs and dogs.
X				I think one of my best hobbies is using the TV remote control
			X	I'm really good at maths.
	X			I get stuck on telling time.
	X			I'm not very good at remembering
4	2	0	1	Column Total: Overall: 7
				Percentages
57.1%	28.6%	0%	14.3%	Column Total/Overallx100: Total %=100%

**APPENDIX 4****KIRSTY'S SELF-DESCRIPTION CATEGORY ANALYSIS FORM (16 years)**

KEY: P=Physical, C=Character, R=Relationship, I= Inner qualities

P	C	R	I	Participant: Kirsty: 16 years: Sex: Female
			X	I can't change who I am.
			X	I can only do my best.
	X		X	I've always been an individual.
X				I am not a size 8.
X			X	I'm pretty plain.
		X		I get on well with many people.
		X		I'm friendly.
		X		My friends are like family.
X				I work as hard as I can.
			X	I may set my goals too high.
			X	I can only be me.
		X		If some people don't like that...
X				I won't apologise.
4	1	4	6	Column Totals: Overall:15
				Percentages
20.7%	6.7%	26.7%	40%	Column Total/overallx100: Total %=100%

**Figure1:** Comparison of Annie’s and Kirsty’s self-descriptions



**Table1:** Summary of Annie’s and Kirsty’s Self-descriptions