

An Overview of Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth

LI Dan^{[a],*}

^[a] Postgraduate, College of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 12 August 2014; accepted 7 October 2014

Published online 26 November 2014

Abstract

Self-worth refers to people's attitude and feeling about themselves based on their judgment and assessment of their value. It reflects the extent of self-acceptance. In relation to the research in foreign countries, China's research on self-worth starts a bit late, whose research objects are mainly adolescents including the young students. This paper is going to touch upon this topic from three aspects that are theoretical research, correlational research, and strategic research. Conclusions thus will be drawn coupled with implications.

Key words: Adolescents; Self-worth; Connotation; Correlational research; Strategy

Li, D. (2014). An Overview of Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 5(4), 160-164. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/6076> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6076>

INTRODUCTION

Self-worth reflects the degree of self-acceptance of a person, which is the subjective feeling of the person about his or her value. Studies have shown that self-worth has immense and far-reaching impact on the young students in terms of their cognition, motivation, emotion and social behavior (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). A high degree of self-worth is likely to drive people towards the extreme of narcissism, whereas a low degree of self-worth often makes people filled with anxiety and throw them into desperateness. According to the studies conducted by

Fan Wei, Chen (2002), Zhou (2005), and other scholars, a moderate level of self-worth is the prerequisite for individuals' mental health, which can promote a sound mental health. Adolescents, who are in the prime period of growth, have not yet formed a sound and stable self-worth. However, a sound and stable self-worth can help them study and live in optimism, and can inject confidence and courage into their heart so as to overcome difficulties and develop good mental health.

1. THEORETICAL RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENTS' SELF-WORTH

"Self" is the core element of personality, which, to a certain extent, restricts the development of human behavior and other psychological factors. Self-worth is a hot topic in the research field touching upon "self". With regard to the "self-worth", opinions vary among different scholars, and no unified definition about self-worth has been reached so far. This paper is going to elaborate the theoretical research on self-worth from three aspects, that is, connotation, structure, and measurement.

1.1 Connotation

Self-worth or self-esteem is an important aspect of an individual's "self". Being multi-dimensional and multi-level, its core is the judgment and experience of people's own value (Huang & Yang, 1984); at the same time, self-worth has widespread effects on people's own cognition, emotion, and behavior (Campbell, 1990). In order to make clear the connotation and denotation of self-worth, different scholars have given definitions from different perspectives. James is the first one to study self-worth. He believes that self-worth is equivalent to success or ambition. From the viewpoint of James, we can raise people's self-worth from two aspects, that is, increasing the level of individual success and reducing the level of individual ambition. Rosenberg points out that self-

worth is a positive or negative attitude towards the person himself, and that self-worth reflects the degree of self-acceptance and self-respect. Besides, Mischel believes that self-worth is the judgment of a person's own value by himself or herself (Mischel, 1986). According to Steffenhagen, self-worth is the sum total of a person's psychological self, physical self and social self.

Chinese scholar Zhang Chunxing proposes that self-worth is an individual's consideration that he or she is important and valuable, and is the feeling of accepting and loving himself or herself (Zhang, 1992). Lin Chongde notes that self-worth is the part of self-consciousness that has the meaning of being judged. It is associated with self-esteem, is an important indicator of mental health, and is the self-experience of one's attitude (Lin et al., 1995). Nevertheless, Huang Xiting argues that self-worth is a relatively stable personality tendency, and is the positive emotional experience of the "objective self" in terms of the "subjective self". In summary, it can be seen that self-worth is a subjective judgment, including cognitive evaluation and emotional process. Capacity and value are the breeding ground that generates self-worth.

1.2 Structure

The discussion about the structure of self-worth goes through a developmental process of being single-factor to multi-factor and to multi-layered and multi-dimensional.

1.2.1 Dividing the Structure of Self-Worth Into Cognitive, Emotional and Sociological Models From the Perspective of Psychological Process

According to the cognitive model of self-worth, the level of self-worth is determined by the qualities that society favors. Brown divides the cognitive model of self-worth into self ideal, weighted sum of importance, and addition of items. As for the emotional model, self-worth is composed of an unconditional sense of belonging and a sense of control. It takes shape in the individual's early life, and depends on the interaction between parents and children. It will become more stable after its formation, then it can guide individuals to look at themselves and at the people and things around them. The sociological model suggests that self-esteem or self-worth is affected by social factors such as occupational prestige and social status. The more respect an individual receives, the more self-worth will he or she gains.

1.2.2 The Structure of Self-Worth From the Perspective of Its Formation

The early structure of self-worth tends to be a single factor. Rosenberg believes that self-worth is a good or bad attitude held by a person towards himself or herself; it is an overall evaluation of a person, whether it is self-affirmation or negation; it is a single factor (Harter, 1985).

As for the two-dimensional structure of self-worth, Wylie deems that self-worth contains capacity and self-

acceptance; nevertheless, Tafarodi and Swarm think that self-worth is made up of self-competence and self-appreciation; Branden yet divides self-worth into self-respect and self-efficacy.

With regard to the multi-factor structure of self-worth, Fleming and Watts point out that self-esteem, social confidence and academic ability constitute self-worth; However, Coopersmith argues that capacity, rights, importance, and moral qualities make self-worth; Chinese scholar Wei Yunhua divides self-worth into six parts which are appearance, achievement, discipline, helping others, morality, sports and capacity (Wei, 1997); Song-Hattie proposes that self-worth comprises seven dimensions and includes two aspects, i.e., academic self-worth and non-academic self-worth; in addition, Watkins and Mhoya point out eight dimensions that constitutes the structure of self-worth.

Huang Xiting, a Chinese famous psychologist, considers that self-worth is a multi-level and multi-dimensional structure model, which divides self-worth into three special aspects (global self-worth, general self-worth, and special self-worth). He also goes further to classify the general self-worth and special self-worth into personal self-worth and social self-worth, and believes that the personal and social dimensions of special self-worth contains five parts which are from interpersonal, moral, physical, psychological and familial angels. Through tests, this model is in line with the basic characteristics of adolescents' self-worth, so it is reasonable.

1.3 Measurement

As for the method of measurement, self-worth is primarily measured by means of questionnaire, especially self-report scale. At present, the commonly-used self-report scales of adolescents' self-worth are as follows:

The first is Self-Esteem Scale (SES), which is invented by Rosenberg (1965) to describe the overall self-worth of individuals; the second is Coopersmith's Self-esteem Scale (CSE), compiled by Coopersmith (1967). The correlation coefficient between CSE and SES is 0.72; the third is Self-descriptive Questionnaire (SDI), designed by Mboya (1995), which comprises eight dimensions such as physical energy, emotional stability, health, relationships with peers and others.

In China, Huang and Yang (1998) have designed "Self-report Scale of Adolescents' Self-worth", including three subscales (overall self-worth, general self-worth and special self-worth). This scale is of higher reliability and validity; Wang and Zheng (2006) have made another self-report scale which contains three subscales (personal goal, interpersonal acceptance and moral principles). Since the "Self-report Scale of Adolescents' Self-worth" is in line with Chinese culture, it is ideal to test the self-worth of Chinese young students. And we can now understand that it is widely used in China.

2. CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENTS' SELF-WORTH

Several aspects have been studied in terms of the relation between adolescent's self-worth and other factors.

2.1 Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth in Light of Demographic Variables

For this, scholars have mainly touched upon gender, grade, character, type of school, and place to study adolescents' self-worth. Zhai Hongchang and other researchers (2000) have found that such demographic variables as gender, grade, type of school would exert significant influence to adolescents' self-worth. Wang (2000) suggests that although the self-worth of middle and high school students do not differ in gender, remarkable differences exist in terms of the type of their school. Ou Yangxia and Liu Hui (2008) point out that the self-worth of technical secondary school students tend to increase along with the growth of the grade, and the differences are significant. In addition, Jin Zeqin and Liu Yin (2010) find that there are differences in self-worth among the first-grade and second-grade senior high school students; such differences could also be easily found between the students in urban areas and in rural areas.

2.2 Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth in Light of Academic Performance

According to the study carried out by Wyile (1979), the correlation coefficient between self-worth and academic performance is 0.1-0.5; Shavelson and Bolus (1982) have proved that there is a causal relationship between the self-worth and academic performance; Tan (1997) has found that the academic performance and self-worth are positively correlated, that is, compared with the academic overachiever under the same conditions, low academic achiever has a lower degree of self-worth; Zhou (2013) has also studied the self-worth of middle school students who do not have a good academic performance, and proposes that the factors affecting their self-worth include the personal factor and external factor, such as personal ability, faith, family structure and so on.

2.3 Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth in light of Mental Health

Fan and Chen (2002) have studied the self-worth of high school students in Chongqing, and indicate that the higher the self-worth is, the lower their anxiety level will be, and the better their mental health will become; Zhong et al. (2003) have carried out a study to explore the self-worth of middle school students, and find that the self-worth and mental health have a significantly negative correlation. Tao and Yang (2002) have also come to the

same conclusion when studying the self-worth of high school students; Zhou (2005) has made a research on the self-worth of students in higher vocational and technical colleges, and indicate that "their self-worth is negatively correlated with the scores in the subscales of SCL-90 Scale, and differences exist between the students who have a higher degree of the self-worth and those who have a lower degree of self-worth (Zhou, 2005).

2.4 Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth in Light of Coping Style

Through the study on the self-worth of middle high school students, Wang (2003) finds that there is a positive correlation between the self-worth and coping style; Luo et al. (2012) have researched the self-worth of leave-behind children in rural areas, and reveal that the overall self-worth and familial self-worth can predict negative coping styles; Jing and Shi (2013) have conducted an empirical study on the relationship between the college students' self-worth and coping style as well as self-harmony, which confirms that the self-worth is positively associated with positive coping style, and is negatively associated with passive coping style. Zhou Wenna also proves this conclusion by means of the research on the self-worth of higher vocational and technical college students. It is worthy of noting that these findings are consistent with the results given by foreign scholars.

2.5 Research on Adolescents' Self-Worth in Light of Attributional Style

According to Coopersmith (1967), the children who have a higher degree of self-worth are usually close to internal control rather than external control; Chandier (1997) and Pickering (1998) have shown that the college students who have a higher degree of self-worth tend to have the capacity to control themselves, and tend to believe that they have strong capabilities and that they have been working hard; however, the college students who have a lower degree of self-worth tend to attribute their academic success to luck. Besides, Chandier and Pickering also point out that self-worth and attributional style interact as cause and effect, and that they could affect each other (Pickering, 1998); Fu (2008) discloses that the attributions style of individuals towards success and failure will affect their evaluation of themselves. In this sense, Attributional style could directly affect self-worth, and could indirectly influence self-worth through the emotional experience of individuals.

In addition to the above studies, the relations between self-worth and other factors such as family education, interpersonal relationships, subjective well-being, social support, and self-harmony have been explored. This paper will not cover them in details due to limited space and time.

3. STRATEGIC RESEARCH ON DEVELOPING ADOLESCENTS' SELF-WORTH

Studies have found that a higher degree of self-worth is usually associated with positive emotions, such as happiness, quietness, peace, etc., whereas a lower degree of self-worth is usually related to negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, guilt, and so on (Liu, 2004). Rosenberg believes that a person who has a low degree of self-worth is likely to feel inferior to others, but the one who has a higher degree of self-worth can not only recognize his or her own shortcomings, but also can avoid finding fault with himself or herself. Besides, this kind of person can enjoy a good level of self-acceptance and self-tolerance, and also can make efforts to overcome his or her shortcomings. Moreover, he or she tends to show respect and love to his or her value. Given the importance of self-worth, this paper has given proposals and strategies in terms of improving the self-worth of adolescents.

The adolescents themselves should establish a correct outlook on life, which is the preconditions for the formation, maintenance, and improvement of their self-worth; they should pay attention to their figure, physical energy and clothing in order to improve their physical self; besides, they should enhance self-efficacy and sense of achievement; when encountering social comparison, they should use an appropriate self-defense mechanism (Tan, 1997); in addition, they should learn to treat themselves objectively and develop a correct understanding of themselves.

As children's first teachers, parents should permeate the knowledge of self-worth into the everyday life of children by means of practical actions (Gao, 2012), so as to help children enhance their skills, to give them opportunities for self-expression, and to give due encouragement to children. Moreover, parents should change the rude parenting style; instead, they should show unconditional concern to children, give more understanding to children, and try to less punishment and reject children. In this way, children could grow up in a favorable family environment (A Na, 2011).

As a specialized institution to impart knowledge and educate students, school should conduct active and diverse extracurricular activities and social practices, such as opening mental health classes, lectures or group activities, and so on; besides, school should improve the professional level and guidance level of teachers who give mental health lesson to students; furthermore, school should carry out stress training and stress-coping training; in addition, a platform where school can have a long-term communication with parents should be established, so that parents can understand and care about their children in a timely manner while being guided to use proper parenting style (A Na, 2011). Last but not least, teachers should

objectively reevaluate students, and give the primary priority to encouragement.

CONCLUSION

In general, scholars both at home and abroad have shown the importance to the effects of self-worth, and all of them believe that the development of self-worth is directly related to the mental health of individuals and is significant for the development of their overall personality (Jia, 2012). In the stage of teens, the self of individuals begin to take shape and gradually becomes mature. Lack of good self-worth will affect the development of individuals' personality and also will bring a lot of psychological disorders. In particular, in the modern society where competition increases and the pace of life accelerates, adolescents are more vulnerable to external factors and tend to fail to develop a good self-worth, which will cause sharp fluctuations in their "emotional self", resulting in many psychological and social problems (Sun, 2005). Therefore, schools, parents and adolescents themselves should attach great importance to developing self-worth.

It is not difficult to find after consulting the literature regarding self-worth that the domestic research on self-worth is generally concentrated in adolescents, especially in high school students and university students. However, the study on other groups is rare, such as the old-age group and the group with physical disabilities. The elderly will find great changes in their mentality due to their physical degenerative changes and changes in living environment (especially the change of role after retirement). In this period, the elderly will have an immensely different judgment in terms of their value, which will affect their mental health and attitude towards life. As for the people who have physical disabilities, their evaluation of their own value is likely to be poor, which finds its expression in self-deprecation, self-abasement, uncommunicative disposition, autism, sensitiveness, and coyness and so on. In this sense, they will find it rather difficult to establish a good self-worth, and to carve out a niche in this society. Besides, it is very easy for them to feel frustrated, to lose motivation, and have mental problems. Therefore, the self-worth of such groups is also worthy of our attention. It is also related to the revision of "Self-report Scale of Self-worth" and of the models of self-worth.

REFERENCES

- A Na. (2011). *Correlational research on the relations between the self-worth, copying style, and parenting style of higher vocational and technical college students* (pp.30-31). China: Inner Mongolia Normal University.
- Campbell, J. D. (1990). Self-esteem and clarity of the self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 538-549.

- Campbell, J. D., & Lavalley, F. L. (1993). Who am I? The role of self-confusion in understanding the behavior of people with low self-esteem. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Self-esteem—the puzzle of low self-regard*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Gao, Y. (2012). *A research on the relations between college students' interpersonal relationship, self-worth and sense of meaning of life* (p.46). Shenyang, China: Shenyang Normal University.
- Harter, S. (1985). Competence as a dimensional self-valuation: Toward a comprehensive model of self-worth. In R. L. Leahy (Ed.), *The development of the self* (pp.5-21). New York: Academic Press.
- Huang, X. T., & Yang, X. (1998). The design of young students' self-worth scale. *Psychological Science*, (4), 289-292.
- Jia, H. X. (2012). *Current situation of and relations between the self-worth, sense of belonging, and sense of inferiority on the part of students in private secondary vocational schools*. China: Hebei Normal University.
- Lin, C. D., et al. (1995). *Developmental psychology*. Beijing, China: People's Publishing House.
- Liu, L. (2004). Theory of self-worth and its implications for early education. *Preschool Education Studies*, (3), 13-16.
- Luo, J., Tan, C., & Dai, X. Y. (2012). Analysis of the self-worth and copying style of leave-behind children in rural areas. *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 20(1), 96-98.
- Mischel, W. (1986). Introduction to personality: *A new look* (Fourth ed., p.294). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Pickering, S. (1998). The relationship of attributional beliefs to self-esteem. *Adolescence. Roslyn Heights: Summer*, 33, 477-485.
- Sun, F. (2005). A research on the feature of deaf people's self-consciousness. *Chinese Journal of Special Education*, (4), 17-21.
- Tan, Y. G. (1997). Discussion on self-worth. *Journal of Southwest China Normal University*, (4), 68-72.
- Wei, Y. H. (1997). Structure of self-esteem and design of children's self-esteem scale. *Psychological Development and Education*, (3), 29-36.
- Wyile, R. C. (1979). *The self-concept* (Vol. 2). London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Zhang, C. X. (1992). *Dictionary of psychology by Mr. Zhang* (p.587). Taipei East China Publishing House.
- Zhou, H. M. (2005). A research on the self-worth and mental health of higher vocational and technical colleges. *Chinese Journal of School Health*, 26(8), 652-653.