

## Exploring the Relationship between the Social Self-concepts of Black South African Adolescents and a Disadvantaged Home Environment: A Life Orientation Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** The study focuses on early (246 respondents) and middle (215 respondents) adolescents in disadvantaged home environments. The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the self-concept of black adolescents. Data were collected by means of survey questionnaires, which were distributed amongst grade 9 and grade 11 learners from disadvantaged home environments in South Africa. By using Pearson's correlation, ANOVA and Tukey's t-test, findings indicated that there is a significant relationship between home environment and the social self-concepts of adolescents. An intervention model is proposed for learners with low social self-concept, which may be used by Life Orientation teachers at secondary schools.

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of the present study was on the social self-concepts of adolescents who live in black informal settlement areas and villages mainly characterized by poverty. As educators for 20 years in secondary schools in economically disadvantaged areas of South Africa in particular townships and informal settlements, we were troubled by the social self-concept of adolescents. This raised a number of questions about the home environment and its influence on their social self-concept, and we looked more closely at our role as guidance counsellors and how we could intervene in their lives. The guiding research question was: Is there a relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the social self-concept of adolescents? The primary aim of the study was to explore the relationship between the social self-concept of adolescents and the disadvantaged home environments. The secondary aim was to devise a model that may be used by Life Orientation teachers to support learners

with low social self-concept. Although the study did not test the model that researchers developed, this was just a proposed model.

A disadvantaged home environment is often associated with low socio-economic areas characterised by lack of proper housing, water, sanitation and electricity. Conditions of deprivation and poverty are associated with decreasing levels of effectiveness in every area of human development. The environment in which we worked resembled Huston's (1991) large urban ghettos, with high concentrations of adults who are poor and chronically unemployed, with virtually no attachment to the labour market. Children living in such neighbourhoods have few models of conventional success and are isolated from the norms and opportunities of the larger society. A disadvantaged home environment is often characterized by parents who are less supportive of, or affectionate towards, their children. Huston (1991) further indicated that fathers who have sustained financial loss become more irritable, tense and explosive, which in turn increases their tendency to be punitive and inconsistent in the disciplining of their children. It is also important to note that poverty is not just the absence of resources but a human condition that affects all aspects of life: social status, education, ability to diversify, income base and vulnerability (Anton 2011).

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Human interaction is a fundamental requirement in an ideal home environment, and this is often missing in a disadvantaged home environment. According to Balk (1995), the functioning of an ideal home enables individuals to gain independence from other family members yet retain connections with them. Parents in an ideal home use both democratic and authoritative methods of parenting, depending on various factors, such as age, level of responsibility and relationships. Jaffe (1998) indicates that parents in an ideal home are warm, firm and involved, and use reasoning and persuasion to gain compliance. Discussions are held with children and independent thinking is encouraged, whereas in a disadvantaged home most of these elements are missing.

In South Africa, a shift from extended family to nuclear family setting in black families, largely caused by transitory labour and urbanisation, has brought dramatic changes to child-rearing patterns. The parents in the nuclear family are often geographically isolated from their relatives, depriving any adolescent of the necessary support from significant others, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles (Louw 1991). Divorce in a nuclear family has a further negative effect on children's social and emotional well-being and school performance (Johnson and Wiechers 2002: 177). Furthermore, *Science News* (4 February 2011) also highlighted that children who come from more difficult home environments and have lower child care have more social and emotional problems.

In a disadvantaged home environment, socialisation is characterized by hostility, arguments, tensions and lack of warmth. Changes in the parents' relationship, for example, divorce, can contribute towards a disadvantaged home environment, and a home environment in which violence occurs may lead to the children from such homes in turn being violent (McIntosh 2003). Child-rearing that is largely in the hands of an autocratic parent or parents produce families that are characterized by authoritarian patterns of parenting, and so jeopardize the social development and self-concept of the child (Garbarino 1985). From a study by Levy (2001) on attitudes towards authority, self-concept and delinquency, it was found that delinquent behaviour was associated with negative self-concept and negative attitude towards parents and teachers. The present study examined parental or guardian supervision in relation to adolescents' social self-concept.

## THE SOCIAL SELF-CONCEPT

Adolescent social development is characterized by interpersonal relations, social competency, sibling and parent relationships, and general social interactions. According to Hovellmeier (1991), it may take a longer or shorter time to build up the child's self-concept. The duration in building the child's self-concept depends on the prevalent atmosphere in the home, which forms the foundation for self-concept formation and interpersonal relations. The role played by significant others in the family form the core of interpersonal relations, potentially giving the child confidence that he/she can relate well with other people. Character traits such as shyness, and withdrawal, or talkativeness and extroversion emanate from home. The type of character trait will ultimately influence the relationships the child will develop outside the home environment.

Amongst adolescents it was found that gender influences interpersonal relations. According to Kimel and Weiner (1985), females generally focus on interpersonal aspects, such as attachments and connections, whereas males focus on intrapersonal matters, such as their individuation and achievements. Age also influences interpersonal relations amongst adolescents. In a study by Ullman and Tartar (2001), young adolescents emphasize social interpersonal aspects, whereas older adolescents emphasize ideology, beliefs and reflection on the self's psychological processes. Older male adolescents focus mainly on vocation, whereas females of similar age are more likely to be concerned with friendship, dating, love, sex and marriage (Kimmel and Weiner 1985). In both studies there was an indication that females value friendship and intimacy whereas males are more concerned about activity-oriented topics and value friendship for its instrumentality, which is for its usefulness in helping to achieve some purpose or goal.

The significant others, like parents, play a major role in imparting social skills to the child. Aggressive behaviour may cause the child to behave antisocially, and frequent residential moves contribute to this. A study conducted by Shek (2002) on social adjustment and problem behaviour of poor Chinese adolescents indicated that positive parental qualities were beneficial to the adjustment of poor adolescents. In economically disadvantaged families, both parents

are constrained by lack of economic resources, resulting in poor parental qualities. Both paternal and maternal parenthood qualities were found to be of vital importance.

Amongst adolescents, sibling comparison is used as a basis of social comparison and self-evaluation, often based on parental treatment. In a study conducted by Feinberg et al. (2003) on sibling and parent relationships during adolescence, focus was on parent-child warmth, parent-child conflict and sibling conflict. The findings indicated that parental negativity toward an adolescent may have such a powerful negative effect on the adolescent that the relationship between sibling differentiation and sibling warmth is no longer of significance. Parental attitudes or differentiated treatment may result in hampered social self-concept. If siblings are treated the same in a neglectful manner, they may turn to each other for compensatory warmth and support (Boer et al. 1992). In other instances where adolescents experience harsh parental and sibling treatment, they resort to outsiders or peers to find happiness (Larson and Richards 1994). Children tend to associate with other children who are similar to themselves in sociometric status, as for example, rejected children tend to form friendships with other rejected children (Cairns et al. 1995). Children who experience frequent conflict with their siblings may have difficulties in certain aspects of social cognition (Stocker and Burwell 2002).

## METHODS

The paper is based on a survey, quantitative research in design and using closed questionnaires (De Vos et al. 2007). The researchers developed their own instrument which was suitable for the unique South African black informal and village setting from which participants were drawn. A five point Likert-type scale was used in the development of the questionnaire, laying out five points separated by intervals assumed to be of equal distance. It is formally termed an 'equal-appearing interval scale' (Tuckman 1999). According to Mitchell and Jolley (1996), participants typically respond to a statement by checking the following: 'strongly disagree' (scored 1), 'disagree' (scored 2), 'uncertain' (scored 3), 'agree' (scored 4), and 'strongly agree' (scored 5). The Likert-type scale gives the respondents the freedom to choose according to their feelings.

The questionnaire covered questions on adolescents' home environment and social lives, such as interpersonal relations, sibling and parental relations, parenting styles, interaction amongst family members, level of confidence, shyness, friendships, acceptance or rejection by peers, popularity and freedom at home (for example, *I talk freely with my parents, I am shy to express myself, I have a bad relationship with my parents, I don't relate well with my siblings, at school the children reject me*).

Purposive sampling was used, whereby adolescents from informal settlements and villages were targeted. The area in which the sample population was drawn is Bojanala East Region in the North West Province of South Africa. The researchers identified a Middle school and a High school in Hebron from which to draw the sample. These schools were chosen because they are in an area characterised by poverty, e.g., poor housing, poor sanitation and high unemployment. Grade 9 and grade 11 learners formed the sample for the research since they represent two stages of adolescence, namely early and middle adolescence. There were 461 learners who formed the sample. Permission for conducting research was obtained from the Area Project Office in Mabopane, after which principals of middle and secondary schools were consulted. Learners who participated obtained permission from parents. The questionnaires were completed simultaneously by all learners in their respective classrooms.

Content validity and face validity had to be ensured accordingly (De Vos et al. 1984), given to experts in the field of Educational Psychology, through the following questions:

- i. Is the instrument really measuring the concept?
- ii. Does the instrument provide an adequate sample of items that represent that concept?

Face validity was a desirable characteristic for a measuring instrument, since it is relevant to those who complete or administer it. The questionnaire was subjectively judged by the researcher first and later given to experts in the field to validate. Reliability in this study was tested by means of the Cronbach alpha coefficient, which was 0.7410. It is generally accepted that a score of 0.7 or higher implies an acceptable level of reliability, and the responses to the questionnaire were considered reliable.

## RESULTS

A number of hypotheses were derived from the literature study, which guided the research prior to being tested by means of the questionnaire.

### Results of Hypotheses Testing

#### Problem 1

$H_{01}$ : There is no statistically significant relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the social self-concept.

To test the aforementioned hypothesis, Pearson's correlation test was used. The correlation was determined as follows:

(i) Home environment and social self-concept

The result appears in Table 1. The null-hypotheses may be rejected on the 1% level since the significance is smaller than 0.01. There is a significant relationship between home environment and the social self-concept. The self-concept is moderate and positive, which means that the more positive the home environment, the more positive the social self-concept.

**Table 1: Correlation between home environment and social self-concept**

| Variables                                | Correlation | Significance |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Home environment and social self-concept | 0.552       | $p < 0.01$   |

#### Problem 2

$H_{02}$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the social self-concept of adolescents who stay under different kinds of supervision at home. The results of testing this hypothesis appear in Table 2. There is no significant difference in the social self-concept of learners who stay under different kinds of supervision. The null hypothesis may not be rejected since the significance is ( $p > 0.05$ )

#### Problem 3

$H_{03}$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the social self-concepts of learners with a different number of children at home. ANOVA, followed by Tukey's t-test revealed that the social self-concept of adolescents who are two in

**Table 2: Mean social self-concept of adolescents who stay under different supervisions**

| Type of supervision | N   | Mean   |
|---------------------|-----|--------|
| Both parents        | 209 | 3.6623 |
| One parent          | 162 | 3.6602 |
| Grandparents        | 38  | 3.5724 |
| Guardians           | 21  | 3.3254 |
| Other               | 24  | 3.5869 |
| Total               | 454 | 3.6344 |

number in a family is not different ( $p > 0.05$ ) from those of children who are five or more in the family (see Table 3). There is no significant difference between the social self-concepts of adolescents who stay with a different number of siblings, thus the null hypothesis may not be rejected and the significance is ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 3: Mean social self-concept of adolescents who stay with a different number of siblings**

| No. of siblings | N   | Mean   |
|-----------------|-----|--------|
| One             | 43  | 3.6395 |
| Two             | 83  | 3.7350 |
| Three           | 135 | 3.6996 |
| Four            | 89  | 3.5384 |
| Five or more    | 105 | 3.5603 |
| Total           | 455 | 3.6367 |

#### Problem 4

$H_{04}$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the social self-concepts of boys and girls. Table 4 illustrates the results when this hypothesis was tested. Table 4 indicates that the null-hypothesis may be rejected. The social self-concept of girls in a disadvantaged environment differs from that of boys in the same environment.

**Table 4 : Social self-concepts of boys and girls**

| Self-concept | N   | Mean   | t-value | Df  | Significance |
|--------------|-----|--------|---------|-----|--------------|
| Social:      |     |        |         |     |              |
| Girls        | 254 | 3.6917 | 2.105   | 451 | $p < 0.05$   |
| Boys         | 199 | 3.5674 |         |     |              |

#### Problem 5

$H_{05}$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the social self-concepts of learners in grades 9 and 11. Table 5 illustrates the results when this hypothesis was tested. Table 5 indi-

cates that the null-hypothesis may not be rejected (on the 5% level). The social self-concepts of grades 9 and 11 learners do not differ.

**Table 5: Social self-concepts of grade 9 and grade 11 learners**

| <i>Self-concept</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>t-value</i> | <i>Df</i> | <i>Significance</i> |
|---------------------|----------|-------------|----------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Social:             |          |             |                |           |                     |
| Grade 9             | 245      | 3.5926      | -1.735         | 449       | p>0.05              |
| Grade 11            | 206      | 3.6947      |                |           |                     |

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between the social self-concepts of adolescents in a disadvantaged home environment. The findings indicated that there is correlation between a disadvantaged home environment and the social self-concept of adolescents. In a home where relationships are positive, adolescents will also learn how to associate with other people in a positive way. The findings of this study are in line with previous research by Von der Lippe (2000: 387) on parents behaviour, which found that respect and positive discussions led to higher ego in their children. On the other hand, homes that are characterized by hostilities are likely to have problematic internal interactions which are detrimental for the socialisation of young people (National Research Council 1993 and Science News 4 February 2011). Ackerman et al. (2003: 695) also found that children from economically disadvantaged families who persisted in problematic behaviour were mainly influenced by coercive parenting and family conflict. The findings of Gibson and Jefferson (2006: 120) are in line with those of the current study, with adolescent development seen as also being influenced by family, paternal and maternal involvement in the child's well-being. It is not only the material role which is important in assisting the child to develop social skills acceptable to society. The degree of involvement of fathers in the socialisation of adolescents should be increased.

The results indicated that for children who stay under different kinds of supervision, for example with grandparents or single parents, their social-self-concept will not differ from those who stay with biological parents. These results differ from previous research conducted by Caputo (2001: 549), who found that children raised by grandparents had behavioural problems. Goodman and

Silverman (2001: 563) indicated that homes where there are extended families are characterized by competition and conflict between grandparent and parent, which can cause tension and confusion in the grandchild. One of the reasons their findings differ from those of the current study may be that in a black family context the grandparents play a significant role and tend to be more honoured than in typical Western ones.

Findings indicate that the social self-concept of adolescents who have fewer siblings do not differ from that of adolescents who come from families with more children. It is the quality of relationships that is significant, and the interaction between siblings. Families in which adolescents experience frequent conflict with their siblings may develop difficulties in certain aspects of social cognition (Stocker and Burwell 2002: 55). These children may develop negative social self-concept.

The findings indicated that the social self-concept of boys differs from that of girls, with girls having a higher mean value. Previous research also indicated that females relate more easily and cope by sharing their experiences with each other (Gibson and Jefferson 2006: 120). With regard to blind learners the findings on social self-concept are also similar to the current study results. Al-Zyoudi (2007: 133) found that among adolescents who were blind, females scored higher on personal identity, physical and family and social self-concept, while males scored higher on self-satisfaction and moral self-concept.

There is no significant difference between social self-concept of grade 9 and grade 11 learners. In both groups of adolescents, early and middle their social self-concept is the same. The findings are in line with previous research by Byrne (1994: 1), which revealed that the structure of the social self-concept is similar across all age groups. The conditions that prevail with regard to interaction, relationships with significant others and peers are the determining factors in a positive social self-concept.

## CONCLUSION

The social self-concept of children play a major role in the socialization aspect of adolescents and in schools Life Skills programmes should address the needs of children from disadvantaged home environments. The researchers came up with a model although not implemented,



which may be used in the GET (General Education and Training) senior phase (Grade 7-9) and FET (Further Education and Training) (Grade 10-12), where the learning area Life Orientation is being offered and an intervention strategy may be implemented.

The proposed intervention model comprises seven steps, which are: identification of learners with low social self-concepts (step 1), intervention-group counselling (step 2), individual counselling (step 3), parental involvement (step 4), involvement of other educators (step 5), involvement of school governing body (step 6) and involvement of experts (step 7). The model is flexible and as a result the Life Orientation teacher may not have to follow the steps in a rigid sequential manner. This model aims to provide guidelines to educators who interact with learners from disadvantaged home environments and have low social self-concepts (Magano and Gouws 2009).

It is crucial that educators conduct follow-up sessions, even after step seven when applying the proposed model. In these follow-up sessions, adolescents should be given coping skills so that they can face the conditions that prevail in their home environments. Of importance is that they are taught in a holistic manner, bearing in mind that the social self-concept forms an integral part of one's development.

According to the Revised National Curriculum Statement from the Department of Education (2002), social development is central to learning in Life Orientation and equips learners to contribute effectively to community and society. This area focuses on life relationships within family and among peers, communication, interpersonal skills, human rights, respect and tolerance. Life orientation educators should not only teach content but should provide a caring atmosphere in their classes. Studies have clearly shown that the role of teachers has an important influence on the self-concept of children (Schmidt and Cagran 2008: 9). One cannot undermine the role that teachers play in the development of learners, especially where the home is disadvantaged with regard to the social self-concept

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