
Studying Self-concept: A Philosophical Analysis

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Introduction

William James in Attwater (1990, p. 163) said, "Whenever two people meet, there are really six people present. There is each person as he sees himself, each person as the other person sees him, and each person as he really is." Is it then at all possible to discover the person in each of us? Is this a myth or a reality? To me and to a scientific realist, we have hidden ourselves in the layers of our public, private and ideal selves that our unique essence, the core of ourselves, a true but unobservable mind independent entities. Adding to this, Gross (1992), believes that we have special relationship with ourselves, which is invisible to others, unless we ourselves expose and make it known, manifested. We are both subject and object. We are self-conscious or self-aware. In line with this, Gross (1992, p.607) mentioned, "... The same person, the same self, is subject and object, knower and known, thinker and thought about, seer and seen," that can be empirically studied, explained and understood. Antirealists oppose such rational thinking. They believe only in objective reality and reject the T-terms, which will be discussed latter in this article. The purpose of this article is to show that self-concept can be explored scientifically, explained and understood. That is, I am attempting to relate self- concept with scientific realism which demonstrate the existence of change (development) and manifestation of self-concept. Hence, in the paper an attempt has been made to discuss the definition and elaboration of scientific realism, antirealism, self-concept, the place of essentialism and some practical examples in relation to hard of hearing children.

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Scientific Realism and its Opponent

Scientific realism is the view that one can be justified in believing of some theory about unobservable (T-terms) entities, such as self-concept, that the entities it posits are real and accurately described by the theory, in the same sense as one can be justified in believing that the theory's empirical predictions are accurate, and that so to believe is what it means for a scientist to "accept" that theory, because the goal of science is to describe reality, even if it's unobservable features (Van Fraassen 1980). Scientific realism is largely theoretical knowledge of phenomena that is constructed from scientific research. Simply put, scientific realism is the view that the aim of science is the knowledge of the truth about observable and unobservable aspects of a mind-independent (Psillos, 1999).

Man as a biological organism is a part of this scientific process. His mind evolved as a part of the struggle in a precarious and changing environment, for existence. Mind is an instrument of survival and adaptation. The nature of the mind as viewed by realists therefore is one of problem solving, not contemplative as in idealism. The self-concept of an individual is one of the most important entities of human being, which can be viewed as way of learning and living sustainable life in this world. The self-concept of an individual develops in his struggle with his world, interaction with social and physical environment, as believed by scientific realists. The learning of the world is built upon a concept of the self adjusted to the world's reality. The building of a concept of the self is what the learning of the world is for. From constructivists points of view, self-concept may be constructed, by the social world (especially parents and schools), be it desirable or undesirable, success or failure (Psillos, 1999). These ideas of such scientific realism are not welcomed by some disciplines in philosophy. To mention few, empiricism and antirealism strongly challenge scientific realism.

Van Fraassen (1980) sees empiricism and scientific realism as being opposed to each other. To Van empiricists see the aim of science as being the anticipation of nature, of producing theories which yield successful

prediction, prediction which are born out by experience. Scientific realism, on the other hand, sees the aim of science as being describing things as they really are. Empiricist challenges against scientific realism in relation to such knowledge of unobservable theoretical entities. As I mentioned above, self-concept is unobservable entity that is impossible for empiricists to study and accept it a reality. Because, the self-concept of an individual about himself (such as physical, social, psychological, academic and others) exist within an individual, being unobservable by sense organs, as claimed by empiricist. It is the person's own view of himself or herself, who is almost always assessed through self-report, directly unobservable to the researcher. The self-concept may be also studied through self rating scales, checklists, Q-sorts, and free-response and observations.

Another discipline of philosophy that challenges scientific realism is anti-realism; anti-realism denies the description of scientific realism. It holds that claims about unobservable are either unjustified or justified in a different sense from predictions of observations. It also denies scientific work, as rationally reconstructed, a scientist who accepts a claim about unobservable believes that it yields accurate predictions of observables, not that it describes unobservable. To antirealists, there may be no such T-terms as self-concept. They believe that it is possible to construct a theory about self-concept for example, only in order to think about self-concept. Hacking (1983) for example said: "Theories about them are tools for thinking". Other antirealist as stated by Hackling (1983) believes that theories are intellectual tools which cannot be understood as literal statement, how the world is. Furthermore, they say that we may use the theories; however, we do not have compelling reasons to believe they are right. Contrary to both of these, scientific realism gives us, in its theories, a literally true story of what the world is like, and acceptance of scientific theory involves the belief that it is true (Van Fraanssen, 1980). To scientific realism, self-concept can be explored, explained and understood, in all its dynamic, developmental processes and changes. Let's look now what self-concept is from scientific realists perspective.

Definition of Self-concept

What are the self and the self-concept? The definition of self may vary, depending on the outlook of different philosophical disciplines. The following definitions represent diversified thought processes. To Murphy (1947), "the self is the individual as known to the individual", and Burns (1980) defines it as, 'the set of attitudes a person holds towards himself.' (Gross 1992, p. 607) said: "Self-concept is basically each person's own subjective view or image of him- or herself as a person." To Trenholm and Jenson (1992, p. 118), it is a "system of affective and cognitive structures (schemas) about the self that lends coherence to the individuals' self-relevant experiences." "The overall awareness we have of ourselves, consisting of all those perceptions of I and 'me', together with the feelings, beliefs, and values associated with them (Baron and Byrne, 1992, p. 133). To Fay (1996, p. 33), self is expressed this way: "Myself is that which has my experiences such as my perception and my desires". Many psychologists prefer to speak of "multiple selves". "...the self-concept includes hundreds, perhaps thousands of self-perceptions in varying degrees of clarity and intensity that we have acquired in growing up" (Attwater, 1990, p.149).

Totally as believed by scientific realists, self-concept could be the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence, that can be measured and explained. In short, self-concept is the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to the self as an object (Rosenberg, 1986). How self-concepts can be realized scientifically through empirical evidences?

Self-concept and Scientific Realism

The self-concept of an individual cannot be seen but can be theoretically explained, whether it is desirable, undesirable, positive or negative. To scientific realists, this self-concept can exist even if we cannot see, independent of the theory we are developing. For some, a self-concept of an

individual is meaningless. It seems meaningless because no-one can see what it is for, and therefore, cannot pictured what it is, but exists independent of mind, as believed by scientific realists. Terms such as "self-concept," "self-esteem," "self-worth," "self-acceptance," and so on are T-terms or unobservable by sense organs, like empiricists are claiming, challenging scientific realism. But can be studied, described, verified, interpreted, theorized and understood, scientifically, in its all developmental process. To this end, essentialists also believe that self-concepts can be discovered and explained. To them any specific kind of entity it is at least theoretically possible to specify a finite list of characteristics, all of which any entity must have to belong to the group defined, unlike the belief of anti-realists.

Self-concept is developmental process that can be studied and understood, not a structure. It is learned, it is organized, and it is dynamic (Charlene, 1993), explained in T-terms. According to this author, self-concept is learned. But, from some essentialists point of view, a person may be born with instinctive self-concept. To me the person may be born with the capacity that gradually emerges in the early months of life and is shaped and reshaped through repeated perceived experiences, particularly with significant others. This is confirmed by constructivists that self-concept does not appear to be instinctive, but is a social product developed through experience, it possesses relatively boundless potential for development and actualization.

Self-Concept is organized. Each person maintains countless perceptions regarding one's personal existence, and each perception is orchestrated with all the others. It is this generally stable and organized quality of self-concept that gives consistency to the personality. Self-concept requires consistency, stability, and tends to resist change. If self-concept changed readily, the individual would lack a consistent and dependable personality (Charlene, 1993).

Self-concept is dynamic. To understand the active nature of self-concept, it helps to imagine it as a a continuously active system that dependably points

to the "true" of a person's perceived existence. This guidance system not only shapes the ways a person views oneself, others, and the world, but it also serves to direct action and enables each person to take a consistent "stance" in life. Rather than viewing self-concept as the cause of behavior, it is better understood as continuously active system of human personality, providing consistency in personality and direction for behavior. The world and the things in it are not just perceived; they are perceived in relation to one's self-concept (Charlene, 1993).

Developing a self-concept is an essential task in early childhood. The baby has to recognize and realize that he is a separate being. This can best be shown by looking at a baby's perception of himself in a mirror. Initially, they give no sign that they perceive themselves as independent or as causal agents, but gradually they understand how their actions affect their reflected images, and that their own and other people's actions are separate. Gradually, they are able to distinguish between themselves and others. An internal and an external image of self develop. By age two, they know they are distinct from other people but they still do not see themselves as others see them, because the self-concept is based on fleeting, sometimes inaccurate perceptions.

As several psychological and sociological scientific researches revealed, at school age children start seeing themselves as having unique and defining personal qualities. They gain a strong sense of their gender roles. Although they start middle school with a relatively shallow self-concept, they start selecting and integrating new discoveries about themselves, using their cognitive powers to bring into focus a picture of self that is sharp and unique.

It is also studied for many years that the adolescent's self-concept is influenced by psychological and social relationships. They are conscious of their self-awareness, know that people can think about their own experiences and this leads to increase self-consciousness and a sense of control. However, the boundaries of self-awareness and self-control need to be realized. In middle adolescence they recognize self-described

inconsistencies and in late adolescence they reconcile the discrepancies in their descriptions and images of themselves. They start thinking in terms of stable, abstract, unifying characteristics. "When this conception of a stable personality combines with a conception of stable beliefs, the mature adolescent has a complex, self-aware, and systematic understanding of self." (Damon and Hart, 1982 in Clarke-Stewart, Friedman and Koch, 1985, p. 607).

Thus children's self-concepts are formed from private reactions to themselves and the reactions from others who play significant roles in their lives. The crucial role that the teacher plays in the formation of the child's self-concept is evident. Teachers have a daily, direct influence on the socialization of the child, not only teaching basic skills as claimed by essentialists. The mastery of developmental tasks and competence affects every part of the self. The sobering thought is that it is fairly resistant to change the self once it is established. The "looking-glass self" reflects everything. "We derive our picture of ourselves through the picture we have of other people's picture of us...,we build up a continuous and changing picture of ourselves, out of our interaction with others" (Gross, 1992, p. 611).

The teacher is firmly at the center of all four factors influencing the development of the self-concept: reaction of others; comparison with others; social roles and identification (Gross, 1992). Every teacher should realize and take full responsibility for the influence they have on their students' lives. They in partnership with the parents should execute firm but reasoned control, while giving positive encouragement to independence in a warm and loving atmosphere (Bee, 1978). In an attempt to understand the self and ideas about the self-concept better, there have been scientific researches that helps, gradually, understand self and the self-concept through the centuries that realize "truth" of unobservable entities of self-concepts. Self-concept could develop towards desirable or undesirable outcome. The undesirable one is which has negative consequence on the part of the

individual as well as the society the individual live in, whereas, the desirable could have positive consequence in the holistic development.

The influence of the teacher on the development of the student's self-concept is evident from scientific inquiries. Information is needed to be able to distinguish between the positive and the negative - some structure is needed to enable us to make more objective and realistic contributions. This must be done by the "self" of the teacher. The expectations are high. We must be warm, loving and accepting children so that these may be implied to academic perfection and good behavior, show respect, allow for individual expression. Most important - we must have high self-self ourselves (Papalia and Olds, 1992). In the area of self-concept we cannot help somebody in trouble if we are in trouble ourselves.

The teacher must help himself and his students to love themselves better, not merely teaching only basic skills, as emphasized by essentialist. Meier and Wichern states that children must have a healthy self-love, be given strategies to deal with guilt. Modern man has also recognized the necessity of a healthy self-concept. "Whether we want to value, accept, or change our bodies, we need first to change our minds. We have to redeem how we observe ourselves. Instead of searching for flaws, we must attempt to see ourselves objectively" (Rodin, 1992, p. 60).

If the following characteristics of the self-actualizing person, as suggested by Humanist Abraham Maslow, we would have a very useful description of what some components of a healthy self-concept should be; and what the teacher could cultivate in his students: Self-acceptance, accepting others and human nature; spontaneity, simplicity and naturalness; task involvement; the need for privacy; autonomy: being independent of culture and environment; consistent renewal of appreciation; peak experiences; social feelings; interpersonal relationships; discrimination between means and goals, and between good and evil; a philosophical, benevolent sense of humour creativity (Meyer More and Viljoen, 1989). All these are developmental process of self-concept; however, they are T-terms, can be

explored, explained, understood, and theorized as “true” as possible, from scientific realist’s points of view.

Studying, explaining, interpreting, understanding and enhancing positive self-concept of an individual is essential, unlike the opinion of anti-realist. In Rogers' (1947) view, the self is the central ingredient in human personality and personal adjustment. Rogers described the self as a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving for consistency. He maintained that there is a basic human need for positive regard both from others and from oneself. Carl Rogers put it this way: "The central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them ... is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable " (Hoekema, 1986, p. 105). Many humans have a problem with "things" that they think they need. Studying, interpreting and developing positive self-concept is essential. Essentialists also believe that knowledge about self-concept can be changed, discovered, constructed, reconstructed and rediscovered, without changing the biological essence of the individual. They also believe that culture and self-concept have innate capacity, in human beings. Self-concept is culturally constructed unlike the biological nature of human beings, which by itself is an important element for the development of self-concept. This is to indicate that self-concept and its development can be explored through scientific research and identified as healthy (positive) and unhealthy (negative) entities, however unobservable. Such an essence is also accepted by essentialists. Studying self-concept of hard of hearing children, from scientific realists' points of view will be described in this paper as an example.

Essentialism

It is difficult to describe fully, the nature of essentialism in this short essay. However, the purpose of this part is to review essentialism briefly. The term essentialism is the idea that everything has an essential nature to it, essence. According to Popper, essentialism is defined by two doctrines. First, "the best, the truly scientific theories, describe the `essences' or the

`essential natures' of things--the realities which lie behind the appearances." Second, "the scientist can succeed in finally establishing the truth of such theories beyond all reasonable doubt" (Popper, 1962, p. 103-104). Today, essentialism implies a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined (Irvine, 1990), including self-concept.

From Poppers points of view essentialism could be people's everyday tendency to assume, often unconsciously, that objects in nature have hidden essential properties that determine what kind of objects they are. This is a belief that there are properties essential to humanbeing and which all humanbeing share, such as self-concept . Psychological essentialism such as the thinking of self-concept is a theory about people's perceptions or beliefs which seems to be neutral with respect to the factual accuracy of these perceptions and beliefs. Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, like self-concepts of an individual, like the belief of scintfic realism. But it is possible to explore the self-concept of an individual through the manefestation of the behaviour. In essentialist view, knowledge of self-concept can be discovered , repressed, suppressed, and recovered through time and experience, unlike social constructionism which emphasizes revolutionary development (Mayr, 1991). For such developments there are two essential elements: innate capacity and culture, according to essentialists. To essentialists innate potential is an important property that is fixed at birth, for psychological development, such as self concppts. Besides, the essentialist position is that queer culture is also an organic rather than artificial, unlike the constructivists who belive culture as a construct. Self-concppts can be carefully constructed even though it is founded upon an innate self-conception (Namy and Gentner, 2002). Essentialist believe that it is possible to reveal the unobservable entity, such as self-concept, but do not give much attention for the enhancement of self-concept, compared to the emphasis they give to basic academic skills, which will be discussed later.

Self-concept and hard of hearing

My research project for doctoral study is related to "Psychosocial functioning of hard of hearing children in primary schools". One of the variables in my research is the **self-concept** of these children, which is used in this article as an example to discuss self-concept. Hard of hearing children do not hear, or do not hear well, due to hearing impairment. They are deprived of sounds of the nature and speech language in our environment. Families and schools communicate by speech, which is particularly difficult for hard of hearing children (Tesfaye, 2002; Shea and Bauer, 1997). This may lead to psychological isolation from the sound and the social environment and poor **self-concept** development. From realist points of view, the poor self-concept development can be revealed, changed, explained and theorised, which is the intention of my study. For example, Antia (1982) reports that hard of hearing children in integrated settings were less likely to interact with teachers and peers, due to their deprived language and communication development that play key role in their development of social communication skills and **self-concept**. From anti-realists points of view such findings are impossible, because anti-realists deny the world is mind-independent. They conclude that realism must be false. On the other hand, scientific realism asserts that scientific knowledge of self-concept exist independently of the minds or acts of scientists and those scientific theories are true of that objective (mind-independent) world. The reference to knowledge points to the dual character of scientific realism. According to realists, we can find out the truth of the theories, such as of self-concept, language development and the like. Unlike anti-realists, my research project believe in exploring the self-concept of hard of hearing children and enhance it. Unlike anti-realist, essentialists also believe in scientifically exploring, constructing T- terms of unobservable entity and approaching the truth, but not changing or enhancing, self-concept.

Essentialist beliefs are influenced by the language that children hear. To them, language provides the basis on which we make sense of the world, learn and develop. They claim that language provides us with the categories,

that we use to classify events and persons and to order them. Language provides the means by which we interpret new experience. Language or discourse is "prior to and constitutive of the world" (Miller, *in press*, p. 32). Bloom and Lahey (1978) and Haslet (1997) suggest that language, communication, social adjustment and a welcoming social environments are vital in the social life of any human being. It is grounded in interpersonal interactions, such as talking, laughing, joking, and discussing with others. Language is used to describe reality for both realists and essentialists.

According to realists and essentialists, the inner states (beliefs, attitudes, traits, emotions, self-concepts and so on) can be inferred from the language we are hearing and using, in everyday life, scientifically studied, understood and explained (T-terms). In addition to this, essentialists emphasize language for competence, for learning and become competent.

To my belief, realists can study and describe complex interaction of inner states. For example, hearing problems often bring communication problems, and communication problems can contribute to peer rejections, poor social skills and **self-concept** developmental difficulties. For further elaboration, Meadow (1980) found that hard of hearing children exhibit characteristics of **poor self-concept**, rigidity, uncooperative behavior, egocentricity, absence of inner controls and impulsivity as a result of poor language and social communication skills. These are results of scientific study, which may be rejected by anti-realists.

In Ethiopia, there are some studies on the hard of hearing children, that confirm the realists' beliefs, developing T-terms, for unobservable entities. Hard of hearing people are undermined, ridiculed and insulted by their teachers and laughed at by hearing peers (Tirusew, 1998). This is due to their disturbed and stammering speech and the perception that they have a different creator and are unique, cursed and useless individuals. Due to such negative attitudes and misunderstandings, hard of hearing people can become violent and aggressive and develop poor **self concept**. Another study in Ethiopia by Fransua (1998) found that self-concepts, positive

feelings, emotions and the relationship between teachers and children were found to be weak, in his study. Due to the children's hidden problems, teachers tend to consider the children to be unintelligent, failing, or stupid. Such attitudes can cause the children to withdraw from the classroom and develop more disruptive behavior. The study of Fransua (1998) further revealed that hard of hearing children's behavior in the classroom was found to be disturbed, such as not paying attention, lying on the desk, being sleepy, getting bored and tired, and asking teachers for permission to go out of the classroom for false reasons. A similar study in Nigeria (Ayodele, 2000) also indicated that many hearing impaired children failed to develop social and emotional adjustment strategies, due to hearing loss and other related environmental factors. All these are mental states that can be theoretically explained and understood, as claimed by realists. These could include states of believing, desiring, remembering, perceiving, etc. The world is as it is independently of what we think about it (Dummett 1993). These are rejected by anti-realist. Anti-realists doubt or deny the existence of all these entities or else doubt or deny their independence from our conceptions of them, unlike realists' and essentialists' believes. Scientific realism and essentialism do not vary in their beliefs that there are hidden essences of human being, that can be theorized, T-terms. However there are some distinctions between scientific realism and essentialism.

Essentialism as an educational philosophy holds that the purpose of schools is to preserve the knowledge and values of the past while simultaneously providing students with the skills necessary to live successful and meaningful lives in present society. Essentialists believe that teachers can investigate and mediate in the development of values, such as traditional virtues as respect for authority, perseverance, fidelity to duty, consideration for others, and practicality. These could be also accepted by scientific realists. But to my understanding, essentialists seems not give much emphasis for the enhancement of self-concept through teachers mediations. They give more emphasis for academic competence. As indicated above, essentialism is primarily an educational movement. Essentialists hold that subject matter should be the center of the curriculum. They urge that the

most essential or basic academic skills and knowledge be taught to all students. Their program normally teaches children progressively, from less complex skills to more complex. Essentialism is related to the cultural literacy movement, which advocates the teaching of a core set of knowledge common to members of a culture or society. Moreover, essentialists maintain that classrooms should be oriented around the teacher, who ideally serves as an intellectual and moral role model for the students. The teachers decide what is most important for the students to learn and place little emphasis on student interests. Essentialist teachers focus heavily on achievement test scores as a means of evaluating progress. In an essentialist classroom, students are taught to be "culturally literate," that is, to possess a working knowledge about the people, events, ideas, and institutions that have shaped society. Essentialists hope that when students leave school, they will possess not only basic skills and an extensive body of knowledge, but also disciplined, practical minds, capable of applying knowledge. In order to provide essential skills for students, teachers should have high competence in their subject matter, and should be current and up-to-date on matters in their field (Scott and Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001).

Furthermore, to essentialists, students must learn basic skills that will make them competent in the workforce and up-to date on the most recent advances in their field (Scott and Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001). This means, essentialisms emphasis on subject-centered curriculum than the psychological readiness such as self-concept, which is an important element for learning, working and living in a community. It seems that essentialism does not give much emphasis for psychological change and developments, due to their rigid philosophy, believing that the essence of human being is fixed. Essentialists give more weight that teachers should prepare trained workers who can contribute to the economic prosperity of the country as well as improve society as a whole, considering self-concepts little. To essentialist teaching basic skills is more essential. From my own point of view, giving less emphasis to the development of self concepts may endanger the holistic development of an individual.

All these scientific thinking including essentialists, revealed that unobservable psychological entities can be measured empirically, interpreted, described, explained and understood, unlike the thought of antirealists. From scientific realists points of view my study intends to carry out **self-concept** intervention that enhance positive self-concept, through sensitizing teachers. Hence, the main focus of my study is conducting, pretest to measure the status of self-concept and immediately apply the intervention, and post test on the change of self-concept, scientifically to show the "truth" as claimed by scientific realists. Realists do think, in the main that we are able to represent the world reliably. Scientific realists think science is the best representation that we have of what the world is like and that its representations correspond pretty closely to the way things actually are. Contrary to this, anti-realists do think that it would never be rational to believe in the existence of the mind-independent entities the realist believes in. No evidence could convince them that some entity existed mind-independently, because the very idea of mind-independent existence is incoherent.

Conclusion

Understanding of oneself should be based on the data that reflect the reality of an individual, which is mainly carried out by school teachers or researchers. The teachers as the agent to share the refined information that obtained from overt behaviour and self report may be the primary person in the realist philosophy of education, to explore, explain, understand and enhance the positive self-concept of his students. Research findings are showing nowadays that a positive self-concept for success in school and in life is becoming a reality. This is to say, positive self-concept is important in the school performance and overall well-being of students; however, unobservable entities. Human self-concept which is unobservable entity can be explored through scientific methods and it is a scientific reality. Thus, the realist concludes, we are creatures who inhabit an objective reality, of which, given our survival, we have the capacity to acquire genuine knowledge. Self-concept of an individual helps him for survival because many of successes

and failures that people experience in many areas of life are closely related to the ways that have learned to view themselves and their relationships with others. To me other competences those are emphasized by essentialists are also important, but could be effective when the individuals' self-concept is enhanced and become positive. Hence, though I consider some realistic aspects of essentialism, due to its rigidity, fixed essences, I may not consider it in the enhancement of self-concept of children. Unlike essentialism, scientific realism is dynamic, and believes in the development and change of the human entities, which can be explained in T –terms.

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