



Children's discursive constructions of the 'self'

Elizabeth Benninger and Shazly Savahl

Abstract

The ways in which children construct and assign meaning to the 'self' could have an impact on their social and emotional well-being, including their coping skills, relationship formation, and behaviour. Furthermore, a child's understanding of the 'self' could influence the way in which they make meaning out of their experiences and internalize these experiences as a means of understanding one's abilities and self-worth. Conditions of poverty and oppression could negatively impact the development of the self-concept and a child's overall well-being. Such conditions exist in South Africa, where the aftermath of apartheid's system of structural racism continues in the form of social inequity, poverty, and violence. This study utilized a child participation framework to explore children's discursive constructions of and meanings assigned to the 'self' within two urban communities of the Western Cape, South Africa. Eight focus group discussions were conducted amongst fifty-four children between the ages of nine to twelve. Thematic and discourse analysis were used to analyse the findings. The themes of childhood, social connectedness, and children's spaces were identified as key influences on a child's self-concept. Four underlying discourses emerged within the themes as central to the participant's self-constructions. These included; (1) *'forfeited childhood,'* (2) *'vulnerability and helplessness,'* (3) *'preserving the integrity of the self,'* and (4) *'opportunities for escape.'*

1 Background and Rationale

The ways in which children assign meaning to the 'self' could have an impact on their social and emotional well-being, including their coping skills, relationship formation, and behaviour. Furthermore, a child's understanding of the 'self' could influence the way in which they make meaning out of their experiences and internalize these experiences as a means of understanding one's abilities and self-worth. In the field of Social Psychology the conscious component of the 'self' is commonly referred to as the self-concept (Egan and Perry 1998) or self-identity (Rogers 2012). Conditions of poverty and oppression could negatively impact the development of the self-concept and a child's overall well-being (see Noble-Carr et al. 2013, Parkes 2007, Savahl et al. 2013, Schimmack and Diener 2002). Such conditions are seen within post-apartheid South Africa, where the aftermath of a system of structural racism remains in the form of social inequity, poverty, and community violence.

World Bank (2013). South Africa overview. *The World Bank Group*. Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/country/southafrica/overview>.