Adolescents’ Competence and the Mutuality of Their Self-Descriptions and Descriptions of Them Provided by Others

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The relation between adolescents’ personality, various competence indices, and the mutuality of their self-descriptions and descriptions of them provided by important interaction partners was studied in two samples of adolescents (12- and 14-years-old). Mutuality (a Q-correlation, reflecting self–other agreement between a self-description and a description provided by an important other) increased with age and was higher for girls. Extraversion and Emotional Stability were not related to mutuality, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were related to mutuality at age 12, and Openness was related to mutuality at both ages. Mutuality was further related to competence indices at both ages. Mutuality with the main interaction partner in a setting was the most important for competence in that specific setting. These results illustrate the important role for the development of competence of the communication with significant interaction partners and of the adolescent’s embeddedness in a social network.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the central developmental tasks during adolescence is the development of a clear and stable self-concept, or self-theory. Such a theory (see, e.g., Epstein, 1973) consists of ideas that persons have regarding themselves and regarding their functioning in the social environment. In theories of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Mead, 1934), people are expected to form ideas about themselves through social interaction. Interaction partners behave in ways that give persons information about themselves, and thus confirm or disconfirm the self-theory persons have developed thus far. As Funder (1980) noted, a basic premise of these ideas is that persons' perceptions of themselves ought to be fairly congruent with others' perception of them. In this paper, we focused on the agreement between the view adolescents have of themselves, and the view that significant interaction partners (i.e., parents, teachers, peers) have of them.

In a review of a large number of studies on the congruence between self-perceptions and others' actual perceptions of the person, Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) concluded that approximately half of the studies showed no significant correlations between self-judgments and others' actual judgments, whereas the other half showed either low correlations or ambiguous results. However, this conclusion has been criticized by others. Marsh and Craven (1991) suggested that the distinctiveness of different components of the self-concept should be considered. Funder (1980) argued that instruments should be used that provide valid information on multiple dimensions of the personality. One way of doing justice to the complexity of self-descriptions is by studying self-other agreement on a wide range of affective, cognitive, and social attributes that manifest themselves in the personality. According to Pelham (1993), agreement on personality dimensions should be studied using an idiographic instead of a nomothetic approach, and he indeed found larger idiographic self-other agreement than nomothetic self-other agreement. In his view "idiographic correlations capture the phenomenological structure and meaning of people's self-view in ways that nomothetic correlations cannot" (p. 673). In such an idiographic approach, the emphasis is on within-person comparisons on a comprehensive set of person characteristics, instead of comparisons between persons on single variables. It is studied, for example, whether judges agree on the personality profile of Person A, instead of whether Person A is more intelligent than Person B.

The California Q-sort (Block, 1961/1978) is highly suited for the computation of the idiographic agreement of such self- and other-descriptions because of the comprehensiveness of the set of 100 items and the idiographic character of the forced-choice procedure. In our study, we used