

Identity, Self Concept and Students' Aspirations and Behaviour

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Abstract

In the paper we briefly outline a research programme that explores the complex relationship between social identification, academic self concept, attributional style, behaviour, learning and attitudes toward higher education. Findings have repeatedly shown that young people's attitudes toward higher education, learning and behaviour are influenced by developmental changes (especially at the ages 15-16 years) as well as group and individual factors. Adolescents with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBDs) were found to have significantly higher negative attributional style than their peers without SEBDs and this has been shown to be related to social identification with peers, family and school and academic self-concept. Implications of findings for future research and educational interventions are outlined.

Reducing youth disaffection and raising young people's aspirations are national and international priorities. For example, the UK Government has set a target to increase participation in higher education to up to 50% of 18-30 year olds by 2010 and they have developed an initiative called 'Aimhigher' to meet the increase in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education in England (HEFCE, 2003). There is evidence to suggest that participation in 'Aimhigher' activities enhances school students' attitudes to and intention to go to university (Maras, Carmichael, Patel, & Wills, 2007). However, findings from the same study also show a potential conflict between students' focus on earning and the reality of university life, post university opportunities and earnings (Maras, 2007). Young people in this study did not generally value education *per se*, nor the generic skills and intellectual development that higher education might facilitate. This work also showed that significant others had an effect on young people's choices at different times in their lives.

Maras (2007) argues that much research in this area has been oversimplified and tended to focus on social context, family background and/or socio-economic factors without taking sufficient account of and understanding the often complex background and routes that young people take to higher education and disaffection that might lead to anti-social behaviour. Maras and colleagues have shown that peers have a significant impact on young people's behaviour, attitudes towards school and learning, and that this is linked to the social context within which this occurs. They propose that it is important to look at the potential role of identification with others and the relationship between this and young people's academic self concept in relation to future life choices (Maras, Brosnan, Faulkner, Montgomery, & Vital, 2006; Maras et al., 2007).

These findings are not limited to anti-social behaviour. A recent study focused upon group factors (social identification) and individual factors (self concept) in relation to attitudes to higher education in adolescents measured by *Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire* (AHEQ) (Maras et al., 2007). This large longitudinal study involved 2,731 young people aged 13-16 years. Female students had more positive attitudes than male students towards higher education, higher levels of academic competence, motivation and identification with school and peers. There were also developmental differences with students aged 14-15 scoring highly significantly more negative on most of the factors compared to peers aged 13-14 and 15-16 years.

These findings are not limited to the UK. A study conducted in Australia (Bornholt et al., in press) provides evidence that psychological motivations influence young people's planned pathways through study, work and family. Bornholt, Maras, and Robinson found that identification with friends, family and school did not influence planned pathways to further study, whereas, expectations by peers and family did have an impact.

Social identification and self concept have also been found to be related to attributional style (Seligman et al., 1984) and materialism (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio, & Bamossy, 2003) in adolescents with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBDs). Maras, Brosnan, Faulkner, Montgomery, and Vital (2006) reported that adolescents with SEBDs had lower self-perceptions of academic competence, behaviour and social identity with family in comparison with a control group of peers without SEBDs. A more recent study indicated that students with SEBDs held more negative attribution style and were more likely than their peers without SEBDs to attribute negative events to internal causes (Maras et al., in revision). Such findings are of particular concern, as high levels of negative attributional style in childhood have been shown to be linked to later depression in adulthood (Hilsman & Garber, 1995).

Current work by Maras has found no supporting relationship between materialism and school identity in students with SEBDs. Preliminary analysis, suggests that students with SEBDs, were more materialistic, less likely to identify with school and family and had lower perceptions in their academic competence. These students also showed a more negative style of explaining events and had lower perceptions of their own general self-worth than control group (Maras et al., 2006; Maras et al., in revision). It could be suggested that problematic adolescents orient toward materialistic values in order to reinforce their sense of identity and define themselves.

In conclusion, in this short paper we have outlined research that supports the need to take account of both social and individual factors in young people's behaviour, motivation and aspirations. It is not sufficient to merely count the number of students attending higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds, or assume that self concept *per se* is at the root of youth anti-social behaviour. Findings suggest a need for age and gender differentiated interventions that take account of developmental changes in young people's lives (Maras et al., 2007). Personal as well as social factors contributing to negative experiences of adolescents with SEBDs must be accounted when developing new diagnostic and intervention methods. Future research should not ignore but rather further explore the importance of young people's social identity and its complex relationships with both individual and social factors for learning and behaviour.

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