RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-EFFICACY AND SELF-CONCEPTS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was focused on the relationship between self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), regarding the beliefs to be able to recognize the needs and beliefs of the others (emphatic self-efficacy) and to establish good relationships (social self-efficacy), and Self-concepts (Actual and Social Self), analyzed evoking the Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987). We used empathic and social self-efficacy measures and semantic differential technique to explore Actual and Social Self in a sample of 76 psychology Italian students at University of Catania. Results showed that psychology students reached on average levels in emphatic and social self-efficacy and expressed a very similar representation of Self-concepts, in terms of Self-Discrepancy Theory. In addition, the more the psychology students perceived themselves efficient at understanding the feelings and emotions of the others and cultivating good relations, the more they expressed a positive representation of Actual and Social Self; further, students with on and above average levels of emphatic and social self-efficacy showed a more positive representation of Actual and Social Self than those with under average. Future implications on the important role played by Self-concepts on other psychological dimensions were discussed.
Keywords: empathic and social self-efficacy, representation of Self, university students.

International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology
INFAD Revista de Psicología, Nº1-Vol.2, 2012. ISSN: 0214-9877. pp: 227-234

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INTRODUCTION

The current paper, linked to Bandura' Social-Cognitive Theory (1986) and Higgins' Self-Discrepancy Theory (1987), analyzed the main results of a study focused on the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and Self-concepts in psychology university students. The construct of self-efficacy differs from that of Self-concept because the former is a context-specific assessment of competence to perform a specific task and an evaluation of individual ability to execute specific behaviors in specific situations, whilst the latter is not measured at that level of specificity and includes beliefs of self-worth associated with individual perceived competence. For this reason, Bandura (1986) argued that Self-concept and self-efficacy represent different phenomena and must not be mistaken for each other.

Regarding to the first topic of this investigation, perceived self-efficacy concerns beliefs about the individual abilities to "organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1986), to control specific activities, situations or aspects of social and psychological functioning (Caprara, 2001), to act with the awareness of personal limits and possibilities, and to influence the behavior of individuals (Bandura, 1997); it means that personal perception in terms of ability or inability in a specific field determines the choices that the subjects make and affects on their commitments to achieve their goals. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to implement the strategies adopted to achieve their aims (Strajkovic & Lufthans, 1998), to have a better academic performance and positive personal goals (Phillips & Gully, 1997 Choi, 2005; Ferla, Valcke, & Cai, 2009), to exhibit prosocial behaviors (Alessandri, Caprara, Eisenberg & Steca, 2009), and so on. For example, in a sample of adolescents, Alessandri et alii (2009) analyzed the longitudinal relationships between individuals' prosociality and their self-efficacy beliefs in regard to emotional regulation and responding empathically to others' needs, noticing that empathic self-efficacy beliefs mediated the relations of regulative emotional self-efficacy beliefs with prosocial tendencies such as caring, sharing, helping, and empathic concern toward the others.

Self-efficacy beliefs are referred to specific related domains of the individual's functioning and regard forms of being, knowing and doing (Caprara, 2001); they are not static but dynamic traits that can be improved through specific learning processes and social experiences (Bandura, 1997) developed in interpersonal relationships. The construction of positive relationships with other people isn't an easy task and requires to improve specific abilities both in empathy (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 2000) and social competence (Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, Karbon, Smith, & Maszk, 1996; Caprara & Steca, 2005). Referring to interpersonal domain, Caprara (2001) defined two areas of perceived self-efficacy: emphatic area, that concerns the beliefs about personal competence to put oneself in other's shoes and to understand feelings and needs of the others, and social area, that regards the beliefs about the individual ability to lead in doing, to represent personal points of view and to play an active part in relationships with other people. In relation to these aspects, Caprara (2001) pointed out significant and positive relations between a) the emphatic self-efficacy and the one in expression of positive emotions, regulation of negative emotions, self-esteem, optimism, and prosocial behavior and b) the social self-efficacy and the one in expression of positive emotions, regulation of negative emotions, and prosocial behavior.

About the second issue of this paper, the framework is constituted by Self-Discrepancy Theory elaborated by Higgins (1987), according to which different types of discrepancies between Self representations are related to different negative psychological situations; the greater are the discrepancies between the actual/own self-state (i.e., the self-concept) and ideal self-states (i.e., representations of an individual's beliefs about his or her own or a significant one hopes, wishes, or aspirations for the individual), the greater is the lacking of positive outcomes; in addition, the greater are dis-

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International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology
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crepancies between the actual/own self-state and ought self-states (i.e., representations of an individual's beliefs about his or her own or a significant one's beliefs about the individual's responsibilities) the greater is the presence of negative outcomes. Another important aspect of Self-concept is constituted by Social Self that is the representation that individual believes that other people have about him/her; it is closely linked to Actual Self (Tajfel, 1981) and evoked in interpersonal situations: so, it is possible to hypothesize that the smaller will be the discrepancy between Actual and Social Self, the greater will be the development of positive psychological dimensions in interpersonal relationships as empathic and social self-efficacy.

PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

The purpose of this study was to explore perceived self-efficacy and Self-concept representations in a sample of psychology students at the University of Catania, Italy. In detail, we analyzed the relationships between emphatic and social self-efficacy and Actual and Social Self, hypothesizing that the more the students will perceive themselves efficient in emphatic and social relationships, the more they will express a positive representation of Actual and Social Self (H1); further, the more the students will perceive themselves efficient in emphatic and social relationships the more they will express a reduced discrepancy between Actual and Social Self (H2).

METHOD

Participants
The sample consisted of 76 university students (6 boys and 70 girls), aged between 18 and 30 years old (M=19,85, *SD*=2,23), attending to the degree course of Psychology at University of Catania, Sicily.

Materials and procedures
Materials were administered in small group setting and were constituted by the following scales.

Emphatic self-efficacy scale (Caprara, 2001). It is a scale, useful to measure the beliefs about personal ability to recognize feelings, emotions and needs of the others, structured in 12 statements in a 5-points scale (from 1=*totally unable* to 5=*totally capable*): e.g. "how much do you think you're able to understand if a person is sad or unhappy?" (Cronbach alfa=.80). The standardized scores, for Italian sample in this age-range, identify 5 levels of perceived emphatic self-efficacy: from 12 to 37=very low; from 38 to 40=low; from 41 to 44=on the average; from 45 to 47=high; from 48 to 60=very high. We reclassified results into 3 levels (under average, on average, and above average) for an easier interpretation of results.

Social self-efficacy scale (Caprara, 2001). This scale measures the beliefs about personal ability to integrate him/herself in a group, to feel at ease and to play a proactive role in social situations. It is made up of 15 statements in a 5-points scale (from 1=*totally unable* to 5=*totally capable*): e.g. "how much do you think you're able to begin a conversation with a person who you don't know very well?" (Cronbach alfa =.88). The standardized scores, for Italian sample in this age-range, identify 5 levels of perceived social self-efficacy: from 15 to 41=very low; from 42 to 46=low; from 47 to 50=on the average; from 51 to 56=high; from 57 to 75=very high. Also in this case, we reclassified results into 3 levels (under average, on average, and above average).

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INFAD Revista de Psicología, Nº1-Vol.2, 2012. ISSN: 0214-9877. pp: 227-234

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International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology
Familia y educación en un mundo en cambio

INFAD, año XXIV
Número 1 (2012 Volumen 2)

© INFAD y sus autores
ISSN 0214-9877

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Semantic Differential Technique for Actual and Social Self (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957; Falanga, De Caroli, & Sagone, 2010). It consists of 36 pairs of bipolar adjectives, each evaluable on a 7-points scale (with the intermediate value equal to 4), to assess the representation of Actual Self ("Me as I am" (Cronbach alfa=.78) and Social Self ("Me as I think other people see me" (Cronbach alfa=.83).

Data analysis

The examination of the statistical significance of results was carried out using the SPSS 15 (Statistical Package for Social Science), by means of Chi Square Test, t for paired samples, One-way Anova, and Pearson's linear correlation.

RESULTS

Perceived self-efficacy

In general, psychology students showed levels of perceived emphatic self-efficacy (M=44,22, SD=5) and social self-efficacy (M=47,35, SD=8,14) on the national average. With significant differences for levels, in emphatic self-efficacy (x^2=9,03, df=2, p=.01) 17,1% of students placed themselves under average, 42,1% of students on average, and 40,8% students above average. In social self-efficacy (x^2=13,45, df=2, p=.001), 51,3% of students placed themselves under average, 17,1% of students on average, and 31,6% of students above average. Most of the students perceived themselves as able or very able to recognize feelings, emotions and needs of the others but half of them perceived themselves as unable to integrate him/herself in a group, to feel at ease and to play a proactive role in social situations.

A significant correlation between emphatic and social self-efficacy (r=.41, p<.001) was found, in the sense that the more students perceived themselves able to recognize feelings, emotions and needs of the others, the more they perceived themselves able to integrate him/herself in a group and to act effectively in social situations and vice versa.

Self-concepts

The representations of Actual (M=4,67, SD=.49) and Social Self (M=4,67, SD=.58) expressed by psychology students were equal, in the sense that their profile was very similar to the one they think that the others have about them. Significant correlation was observed between Actual and Social Self (r=.71, p<.001): the more positive is the representation of themselves the more positive is the representation they think that the others have about them. However, comparing main values of the pairs of bipolar adjectives of the two concepts, very few significant differences were found; in fact, students represented themselves "deeper", "hotter", "tastier", and "softer" than that they think that the others attribute to them; furthermore, they represented themselves less "relaxed", "secure", and "stable" than that they think how the others attribute to them (Table I).

Significant differences emerged in relation to the three levels of emphatic self-efficacy only for the Actual Self representation ($F_{(2,73)}$=4,75, p=.01): psychology students with above average and on average levels of emphatic self-efficacy expressed a more positive representation of Actual Self than those with under average levels (Table II). Post hoc analyses by Scheffe's method noted significant differences in representation of Actual Self between under average and on average students (p=.01).

Significant differences for the three levels of social self-efficacy both in Actual ($F_{(2,73)}$=11,49, p<.001) and Social Self representation ($F_{(2,73)}$=6,38, p=.003) were found. In fact, psychology students with above average levels of social self-efficacy showed more positive representations of Actual and Social Self than those with on average and under average levels (Table III). Post hoc

International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology
Familia y educación en un mundo en cambio

INFAD, año XXIV
Número 1 (2012 Volumen 2)

© INFAD y sus autores
ISSN 0214-9877

analyses by Scheffe's method pointed out significant differences in Actual Self between under average and above average students ($p<.001$) and in Social Self between under average and above average students ($p=.004$).

Relation between self-efficacy and representation of Self concepts

The analysis of correlations between perceived self-efficacy and the representation of Selves (Actual and Social Self) pointed out that the more students perceived themselves as able to recognize other's needs and feelings and the effects of their behaviour on other people, the more they expressed positive representations of Actual and Social Self. In addition, the more the students perceived themselves as able to establish good relations with other people and to express their own opinion in a group the more they showed positive representations of Actual and Social Self (Table IV).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This investigation was aimed to analyze the relationships between perceived self-efficacy and Selves representation in a sample of psychology students, according to Self-Discrepancy Theory of Higgins (1987). General results showed on average levels of perceived emphatic and social self-efficacy in the sense that psychology students perceived themselves sufficiently able to "quickly discover things other people like or don't like when they meet new friends", "recognize need of comfort and emotional support even when not explicitly declared", to understand "whether a person is sad or unhappy" and to "begin a conversation with someone who they don't know very well", to "offer their help to lead a group or organization" and to "find someone to go out to lunch".

No significant differences were found between representation of Actual and that of Social Self, even though psychology students evaluated themselves more positively than how they believed the others do regarding the "quality" of relationships (e.g., "deep", "hot", "tasty", and "soft"); furthermore, psychology students thought that others see them more positively than how they are in the "control" dimensions (e.g., "relaxed", "secure", and "stable"). Actual Self is very similar to Social Self and it highlighted the reduced discrepancy between the two Self-concepts.

According to H1, significant correlations between areas of self-efficacy and Actual and Social Self emerged. Results confirmed that the more the students perceived themselves efficient at understanding the others in terms of feelings and emotions and entering in new groups establishing good relations with other members, the more they expressed a positive representation of Actual and Social Self. In addition, psychology students with on and above average levels of emphatic and social self-efficacy showed a more positive representation of Actual and Social Self than students with under average and this result is consistent with the assumption of Self-Discrepancy Theory, taken into consideration in H2.

In conclusion, the present research confirmed the relationship between self-efficacy and representation of Selves in psychology university students and suggested the need to deepen the effects of positive Self-concepts on other psychological dimensions of human development (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, prosociality, social adjustment, and so on) in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood and also in different curricula university studies.

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Table I – Comparison between Actual and Social Self					
Polar adjectives	Actual Self	Trend	Social Self	t	p
Deep/ Superficial	5,63	>	5,37	2,02	.04
Hot/ Cold	4,87	>	4,09	4,97	<.001
Relaxed/ Nervous	3,82	<	4,12	-2,22	.03
Secure/Insecure	3,72	<	4,28	-3,21	.002
Tasty/Disgusting	5,05	>	4,83	2,16	.03
Stable/Unstable	4,64	<	5,03	-2,51	.01
Soft/ Hard	5,29	>	4,95	2,50	.01

Table II — Differences for levels of emphatic self-efficacy in representation of Actual and Social Self					
Self concepts	Levels of emphatic self-efficacy	M	SD	F	p
Actual Self	Under average	4,34	.33	4,75	.01
	On average	4,82	.47		
	Above average	4,66	.52		
Social Self	Under average	4,37	.45	2,31	n.s.
	On average	4,76	.63		
	Above average	4,72	.56		

Table III – Differences for levels of social Self-efficacy in representation of Actual and Social Self					
Self concepts	Levels of social self-efficacy	M	SD	F	p
Actual Self	Under average	4,47	.42	11,49	<.001
	On average	4,66	.38		
	Above average	5,01	.52		
Social Self	Under average	4,52	.46	6,38	.003
	On average	4,53	.79		
	Above average	5,01	.52		

Table IV - Correlations between areas of self-efficacy and representation of Actual and Social Self		
Areas of efficacy	Actual Self	Social Self
Emphatic self-efficacy	.25*	.26*
Social self-efficacy	.59**	.46**
Significance levels: ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$		

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