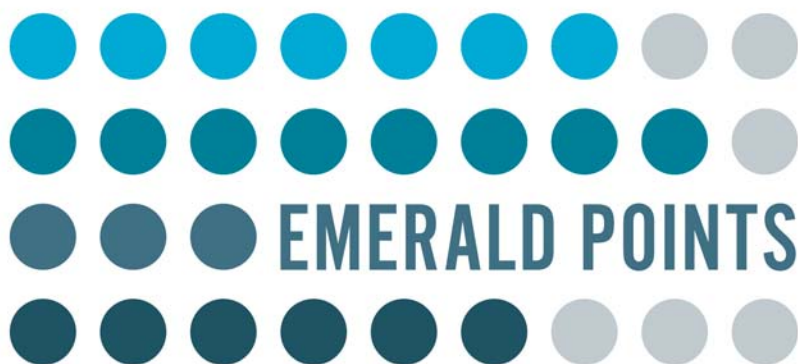


DEVELOPING SELF AND SELF-CONCEPTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND BEYOND

Bridie Raban



EMERALD POINTS

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

We are all aware that there is a substantial sense of one Self, which provides a core for our own existence. Yet within this experience, changes are evident which may or may not reflect or alter this sense of a single Self. It seems that one is at once a person with consistency across time and yet different and changing with each fresh experience. I have no reason to believe that this is a peculiar quirk of my private imagination – it is shared by all of us and is central to an understanding of people as persons.

In this monograph, a specific point of view is put forward concerning persons and personal development. From the moment of birth (and probably before), the individual's potential for personal growth is evident. This point is derived from research and observational evidence which confirm each other. The infant, both from the mother's point of view and their own, has psychological as well as physical needs which must be met willingly in order that babies learn in time to differentiate themselves easily from the people who care for them.

The quality of this early relationship will provide the basis for the emerging sense of Self. However, the ways in which

this sense of Self has been studied have led to some considerable confusion, not least because of the polymorphous nature of the concept. Ultimately, Self alone can never constitute an experience of life; it must be considered within a context of interpersonal experience – the way in which the Self emerged, so the Self is sustained. This view of the person in interaction with others has led to a consideration of children within the context of school and how their learning can be facilitated (or otherwise) by the significant relationships which govern that experience and the relationships that they and their teachers enter into.

Although the words used in the title of this monograph have been used before by many others, within varying frames of reference, notably Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961; Rogers & Stevens, 1967). I shall define the ways in which I choose to utilise them. The enduring sense of Self, I refer to as *structure* and the sense of change or re-emphasis as *process*. Process here refers to both the process of *becoming a person* and the process of what *being a person* means. Process in this sense refers to factors which are both internal and external to the person. What I am trying to include here relates to changes which the person perceives within themselves and those which impinge from relationships with people and events in the outside world. This distinction is captured profoundly by Buber (2012) who refers to the world as:

...twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude... Thus the 'I' of man is also twofold... There is no 'I' as such but only the 'I' of the basic word 'I – Thou' and the 'I' of the basic word 'I – It'. When a man says 'I', he means one or the other... The world as experience belongs to the basic word 'I – It'. The basic word 'I – Thou' establishes the world of relation (Part One).

Process, then, in my definition, is an attempt to capture this ‘world of relation’. Through our earliest relationships we become persons and by being persons we are able to enter and explore further relationships which continue to enhance our personal existence.

Self is a polymorphous concept and refers to a sense or feeling one has of one’s own existence as a unity initially referred to above and it also refers to a unique personalised pattern for each of us.

Self-concept refers to a variable construct which defines and expresses a person’s more or less conscious view of themselves which is partly (but not entirely) based on the responses of others.

These distinctions may remain unclear, though the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4 addresses itself directly to unravelling some of the more complex notions embedded here.

Indeed, this topic has tantalised humankind for probably longer than written texts record. It would be foolish to attempt a comprehensive review of this field of study; therefore, this monograph considers those writers who strike powerful chords of congruence. By ‘congruence’ it is suggested that those authors who best match our own expectations of a topic area are likely to be better understood and more sympathetically studied. This seems to imply that we read and study to confirm us in our beliefs! This may well be part of the truth, but clearly it also enables the chance of extending our understanding into new realms, or at least glimpsing this as a possibility.

This monograph attempts to trace the development of the Self and its consequences for the person across the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines during the second half of the last century and beyond into the twenty-first century. My

own understanding has been deepened by ignoring the compartmental nature of various studies, and by attempting to unify theory and evidence into a single conception of the process of development. Here, I try to trace the threads of personal uniqueness, how it influences and is influenced both by itself and others throughout our lives.

The first section of this monograph addresses both theoretical speculation and empirical research which have been found most profitable to pursue and weave together. The second section presents a practical observation study of four children in their homes, who later completed their first term in school. These observations, coupled with the school data available on these same four children will serve to illustrate some of the issues raised in the first section.

SECTION 1

*I am a part of all that I have met
Yet all experience is an arch where through
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.*

—Tennyson, *Ulysses* (1833).

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RESEARCH FINDINGS CONCERNING MOTHERS AND INFANTS

During the first half of the twentieth century, studies about infants were concerned with what society in general, and families in particular, 'did' with their young child. They referred to the way in which the child was 'moulded' or 'shaped' by their environment. Emphasis was entirely on the external influences on the child, implying that the child was an 'empty vessel', a passive receiver whose final characteristics could be ascribed to others, not them. This point of view was also held by the empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth century, notably Locke (1632–1704) who believed, with Aquinas, that there was nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses. He argued that there was no knowledge in advance of experience (a priori), but only after experience (a posteriori); that knowledge is simply ordered experience, and this is indeed the theme of Locke's most important book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 1690 (see Lowe, 2002).

This conception has been part of the study of psychology through the first half of the twentieth century and can be

found in the works of James (1902), Watson (1924), Skinner (1938, 1953) and Hull (1943). However, babies, psychologically speaking, are far more competent organisms than they were originally given credit for. The baby is no longer discussed in such purely negative terms as the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' with which William James once characterised early consciousness, nor is the baby seen as an assembly of reflexes.

It seems clear that the main reason for these points of view being held was that no attention was paid to the possibility that even the very youngest babies manifest behaviour which is organised in a particular manner from the beginning of life, and that they have an individuality of their own that determines how they respond to parental and other care which even determines the nature of that care itself. The nature of the young baby was never really considered by psychologists concerned with cognition and socialisation, during those early days of psychological enquiry.

There are many more studies, however, which indicate from the beginning of life, that infants are structured in such a way that they will help to determine their own experience, and adults who care for them must take into account and respect the particular kind of organisation which they bring into the world. For instance, after carrying out a frame-by-frame analysis of film sequences of mothers and babies smiling at each other, two things were evident (Richards & Bernal, 1976); the infant's behaviour (in this particular context) went through a definite sequence, and the mother's behaviour was carefully phased to the infant's behaviour. The infant would, for example, be quietly attentive while the mother smiled, they would then gradually become more and more active, winding themselves up as it were, until fully wound, and then they would pause for a moment and smile. It seemed important that at this moment the mother stopped all activity, giving the