

Exploring Self-Concept: Rural and Urban Underpinnings

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Abstract

Self-concept is an important construct that provides significant information regarding the mental health of adolescents. The present study aims to explore the understanding of self-concept by rural and urban adolescents of India. Participants aged between 13 to 18 years responded to the question “Who am I?”. Twelve themes were arrived upon using thematic analysis. The results suggest that the understanding of self-concept differs for the rural and urban adolescents on certain dimensions. The study further divulges the changes that have taken place and the new ways in which adolescents have started viewing their ‘selves’.

Keywords

Self-concept, Adolescents, Rural, Urban

1. Introduction

Self-concept is an individual's understanding of himself or herself in relation to the physical, social, moral, emotional and existential contexts. It refers to an individual's evaluations of past behaviours, affects his or her present behaviour, and shapes the future actions of the individual. “The self-concept is the sum total of the individual's thoughts and feelings about himself or

herself as an object” (John, 2000). It plays a very significant role in the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development of children and adolescents. As there is a tendency to see the life through the viewpoint of others, the self-concepts of people tend to get influenced by the interactions one has with others. If an individual’s interactions with other people are positive, the person forms positive self-concepts while negative interactions make an individual form negative self-concepts. “These perceptions an individual has of himself or herself are influenced by a number of factors such as evaluations of significant others, reinforcements, and attributions of behaviour” (Shavelson *et al.*, 1976).

Self-concept plays an important role in a person’s life especially during adolescence. Adolescence is a transitional period during which a child is becoming, but is not yet, an adult. It is a time when many physical, psychological, behavioural and social transformations happen and when adolescents develop a lot of behavioural patterns and relationships they will take into their adulthood (Committee on Adolescent Health Care Services and Models of Care for treatment, 2008).

Researchers from India have compared the self-concept of different groups in rural areas without comparing these groups to urban samples but most of these researchers have used urban samples exclusively. Although the self-concept of urban students was higher as compared with the self-concept of rural adolescents in the study carried out by Devi & Prasanthi (2004), this difference was not significant. Parrey & Kumar (2013) found that the ideal self-concept of urban higher secondary school students was higher than rural higher secondary students but no significant difference was found between the real self of urban and rural students.

Cattell (1957) referred to self-concept as the ‘key-stone of personality’. Self-concept appears to be a comprehensive and exhaustive domain that represents personality at large. Recognizing its broader coverage than any other trait of personality, self-concept may be seen as one of the possible dimensions that gives direction to the whole life; hence was chosen as the research topic of this study.

Self-concept becomes more relevant during adolescence when the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of an individual is taking place. Changes during adolescence do not only influence adolescents’ social behaviour, but also influence their ways of perceiving themselves, that is, their self-concept (Gonzalez-Pienda, Nuñez, Gonzalez-

Pumariega, & Garcia, 1997). An eminent philosopher and psychologist Nathaniel Branden (1994) talked about the broad and significant implications of the self-concept stating that there isn't a single psychological problem that is not traceable, at least in part, to the problem of deficient self-concept. Keeping the above facts in view, the need for exploring the understanding of self-concept among rural and urban adolescents of India was felt.

Despite the extensive literature on the self-concept of adolescents, the inclusion of both rural and urban adolescents of India in the same study is limited. A few studies that have compared the urban and rural samples have provided mixed results (Sharma, 2004; Sankar & Reddy, 2014; Parey & Kumar, 2013). Against this paucity, an endeavour to explore the different themes that Indian adolescents from rural and urban contexts identify their "selves" with, seemed imperative. Hence, an attempt to conduct an exploratory research and to assess the understanding of self-concept among adolescents residing in these socio-economic milieu was carried out. Efforts have also been made to assess the pre-defined dimensions and areas of self-concept and further discover and unearth the changes in the way the adolescents have started identifying with the different aspects of their selves.

2. Method

2.1 Measurement tools

The self-concept of the participants was assessed using the Twenty statements test (TST) developed by Kuhn and McPartland in 1954. It is a qualitative tool that is used to tap the self-concept of individuals. Each of the participants was asked to write twenty sentences to the question "Who am I?" Each participant was handed over a sheet that had "Who am I?" written on the top with numbers from 1 to 20 written vertically. The participants were instructed to write their responses as statements/sentences against the blank space that followed these numbers. Each participant was individually asked to fill the sheet. The instructions were written in both English and Hindi on each sheet of paper, and the same were explained in both the languages. The participants were asked to respond as if they were giving the answers to themselves- not someone else, and to write the same, in the order in which they occurred to them. They were asked not to worry about the logic or importance of these responses.

2.2 Participants

A sample (N= 40; 20 from rural context and 20 from urban context) of adolescents aged between 13 to 18 years (mean age= 15.5 years) was recruited to participate in the study. There were equal male and female participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to their participation. The participants were asked to fill a demographic profile sheet in order to tap their gender, socio-economic status, family context (rural/ urban), and primary earning member of the family.

The Census of India (2011) defines an urban unit (or town) as:

- All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee, etc. (known as Statutory Town)
- All other places which satisfied the following criteria (known as Census Town):
 - A minimum population of 5,000;
 - At least 75 per cent of the male main workers engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and
 - A density of population of at least 400 per sq. km.

By virtue of this definition, the sample selected from Gurugram falls under the urban adolescents. The participants considered as urban in the present study are the adolescents residing in Gurugram since birth. These participants have been studying in private schools. Agriculture is not even the substantial source of income for the households of these participants.

Rural areas have been defined by the Census of India (2011) as all the areas which are not categorized under the urban areas. The participants considered as belonging to the rural context in the present study belong to different villages of Mahendergarh district of Haryana state of India. This district is 100 kilometres away from Gurgaon. The rural participants of the study have been residing in the units (villages) with population less than 5000, having a *panchayat raj*, and a *sarpanch* as the head of the village. Some of the second generation members of these participants have shifted out of the villages to earn their livelihood. Agriculture is a substantial source of income, if not main, in these areas. Each village has one government school up to

class 10 at least. There are a lot of private schools in Mahendergarh and the participants of the present study were adolescents residing in the villages, but attending these private schools.

All of the participants from rural area were studying in RPS senior secondary school in Khatod village of Mahendergarh district. This village is approximately 4 kilometres away from Mahendergarh city. Nine urban participants of the older age group (grade 11) were the students of Shri S. N. Sidheshwar public school (sector 9A, Gurugram), one participant was a student of Ajanta public school (Sector 31, Gurugram) while another one of G. D. Goenka public school (sector 48, Gurugram). One urban participant of the younger age group (grade 9) were studying in Gyan Devi public school (sector 17, Gurugram), six in Presidium school (sector 57, Gurugram), one in Our Lady of Fatima convent school (sector 14, Gurugram) and another one in Maru Mal public school (sector 4, Gurugram).

2.3 Procedure

For the urban sample, the participants were given the “Who am I?” sheet of paper with instructions. All urban participants in the present study were residents of Gurgaon (Gurugram now). For the rural participants, the “Who am I?” sheet was given to the students of R.P.S. senior secondary school of district Mahendergarh of Haryana state.

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. The participants were assured that data obtained from the study will be used for research purposes only and the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants will be maintained. The entire data gathering process was done between June 2017 and August 2017. The time taken by each participant for writing the responses was the same.

3. RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the obtained data was carried out to analyse textual data and elucidate themes through a systematic process of coding, examination of meaning and provision of a description of the social reality. Three stages of coding were identified while carrying out a thematic analysis of the data.

Stage 1: Open coding. General patterns, themes and metaphors that encapsulate the ideas conveyed in participants' conversations were noted.

Stage 2: Axial coding. The codes were revised and amalgamated into more definitive themes, making connections between different categories that seemed related.

Stage 3: Selective coding. The final stage of analysis involved the unification of the different categories around the core-code or theme.

Codes and categories were identified while carrying out the open coding of the participant responses. The refinement and organization of the codes during the axial coding resulted in the identification of the following themes:

- (1) independent and interdependent self;
- (2) youth slang of the millennials and role of media;
- (3) gratitude and indebtedness;
- (4) psychological self and expressions;
- (5) love for country;
- (6) the temporally near 'now' or temporally distal 'future' self;
- (7) respecting elders, value system and being a good boy/girl;
- (8) physical self-concept;
- (9) religious self;
- (10) interpersonal attraction, romantic relationships and sexuality;
- (11) concerns related to social norms and;
- (12) desire to achieve versus parental expectation.

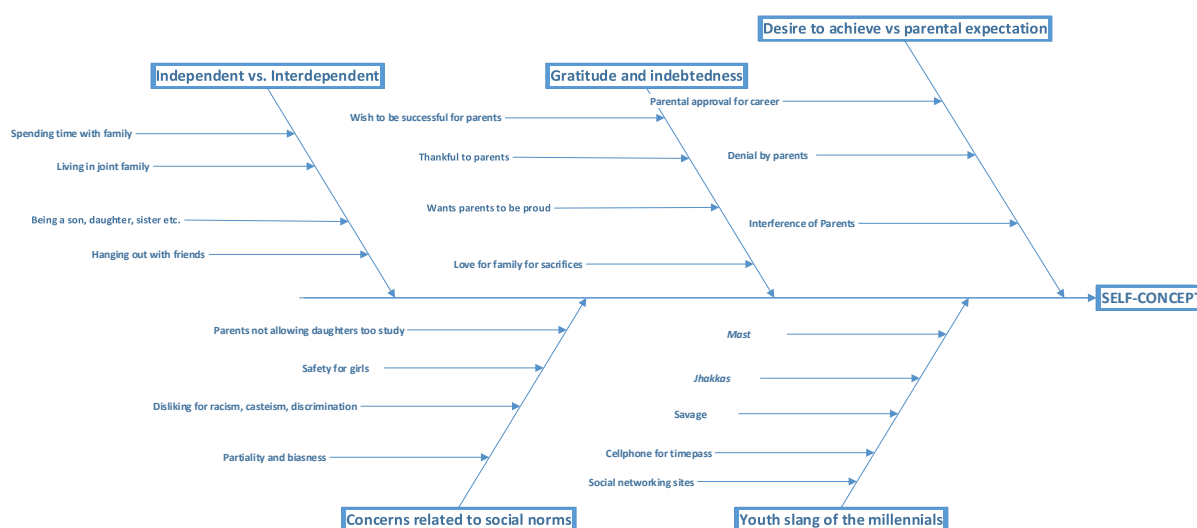


Figure 1. Fish-bone diagram for the coding of themes

As can be seen from the above table, a fish-bone diagram has been adhered to for noting down the themes culled out from the data of the present study. The codes and the data interpretation were cross-checked by two experts. The qualitative analysis of the data was tested using two judges to establish the inter-rater reliability of the themes emerging from the data. The codes arrived upon during the open coding were pieced together to develop the following themes/categories:

Independent and interdependent self: Rural participants of the present study identified the self as the part of a joint family while the urban participants did not identify the self with this family and social setting. Rural adolescents described the self as belonging to a Grade of an educational institution, much more frequently as compared to their urban counterparts. The participants of the rural context, thus, seem to be more inclined towards the interdependent or “us” culture while the urban adolescents seem to be more in line with the independent or “me” culture.

While 100% of the participants from rural context identified the self in the terms of loving their family and friends, only 40% of the urban participants did so. Though some of the urban participants identified the self as loving their parents and family, the percentage of urban adolescents relating the self with these aspects is lesser as compared to the rural population.

Being a son/daughter, sister/brother, friend or a best friend, having a lot of friends, and hanging out with friends has been associated with the self a lot more by urban participants as compared with their rural counterparts.

One of the urban participants said, “*I have a lot of friends but I still need a lot more.*”

A few other urban participants said, “*I love hanging out with my friends.*”

Youth slang of the Millennials and the role of media: An interesting finding of the present study is the use of certain slangs by the urban adolescents in defining the ‘self’. Terms such as *savage*, *mast*, and *jhakkas* have been used by the adolescents to describe themselves. The youth slang of the Millennials (individuals born between 1980 and 2000) has been used by these participants.

One of the urban participants said, “*I am savage*”, another one mentioned herself as ‘*mast*’ and yet another one as ‘*jhakkas*’.

The self has also been identified in terms of being or not being associated with social networking sites and the use of devices like mobile phones. One of the rural participants said,

“I am not on social-networking sites”, whereas an urban participant mentioned that she loves using her cell phone in free time. Other concepts of the ‘self’ identified by the adolescents were: care for others, being aware of the environment and saving it (“I don’t like deforestation.”), being an animal lover (“I am a dog lover.”), liking peaceful environment, being someone who likes maintaining and organizing things etc.

Gratitude and indebtedness: Rural participants in the present study have equated the self with their parents supporting them and them being thankful to their parents for doing so. While talking about their future, the rural adolescents have identified the self as wanting to achieve their goals and making their parents proud, or raising the standards of their households etc.

One participant from the rural context said, *“My father supports me a lot and provides me with everything I need. I love my father.”*

Another rural participant said, *“I am thankful that my parents are allowing me to study as a lot of parents don’t let their girls do that.”*

Psychological self and expressions: Rural participants have rarely linked the self with being good and bad at expressing emotions and feelings, or identifying it with their strengths. Two adolescents from the rural context recognized the self with being confident, brave and bold while only one boy linked the self with being brave, strong and confident. Urban adolescents, on the other hand, have linked the self with psychological aspects and being good and bad at expressing their feelings (*“I am not able to express my feelings”, “I am easily irritated, angry, restless and edgy”, “I am self-centred”*). While only 10% of rural participants have lined the self with being good or bad at expressing their feelings and their strengths, 40% of urban participants have done this.

One of the urban participants stated, *“I am a person who can get over things easily. I will not cry over things and would not try to hurt myself.”*

Another urban participant said, *“I am short-tempered. I can’t express my feelings properly. I have difficulty in making decisions, I get irritated, angry, restless and edgy.”*

A lot of participants saw the self as being happy with the way they are, being self-dependent and having self-respect. One of the participants stated she does not care what the world thinks about her. Urban female participants mentioned that they love themselves the way they are, and have a lot of self-respect and self-esteem.

'Love' for country: 55% of the rural adolescents expressed the 'love' they have for their country and that they want to work for the betterment of the country and serve it. Some of these participants also showed their respect for Indian army and their desire to be a part of it. Only 10% of the urban participants have made a mention of the self in relation to the country. Though participants from both the backgrounds have stated that they are Indian, the sheer percentage of them expressing their 'love' for the country varies.

The temporally near 'now' self or the temporally distal 'future' self: Thinking about the self from a more distal perspective focuses attention on one's broader goals and values (Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008) while thinking about it from a near perspective focuses attention on one's relatively immediate goals and values. The adolescents from rural settings have correlated themselves more with the distal 'future' self while the urban adolescents have correlated themselves with the 'now' self. The self has been understood as having aspirations and will to achieve something by 100% of the rural participants, with some participants mentioning their aspirations again and again ("*I want to become an engineer*", "*I want to join Indian army*", "*I want to go to space*", "*I want to become an IAS officer*", "*I want to fulfil my dreams as well as my parents*"). Only 50% of the urban adolescents defined the self in relation to their aspirations and the frequency of them doing so is also very less as compared to the rural participants.

Educational self: 75% of the rural participants see themselves as a part of a school and a particular grade (standard/class) while only 50% of urban adolescents identified themselves as a part of a grade or school. Among the urban population, more students of class ninth identified themselves as a part of a grade or an institution ("*I am a student of class 9.*" "*I am a student of RPS school*") as compared with participants of grade eleven with their percentages being 70% and 30% respectively.

Respecting elders, value system and being a good boy/girl: The elderly in India are generally obeyed, revered, considered to be fountains of knowledge and wisdom, and treated with respect and dignity by family and community members (Chadha, 2001). 40% of the rural participants correlated the self with respecting their elders while a few locating the self with respecting younger people as well. None of the participants from urban backdrop described the self in terms of respecting elders. Lohumi & Lohumi (2015) said that Indian culture places a very high

importance on respecting elders. The adolescents from rural setting seem to identify the self more in terms of respecting elders, with being honest and not lying. Rural population also identified their selves as being good sons/daughters, sincere and good students, good human-beings and hard-working person. They also said that they like helping needy and physically challenged people and people in general as well. One of the rural participants said her family values are very high and she lives by them.

Physical self-concept: The self was seen to be comprised of physical characteristics like being tall, having good hair, being fit, being good looking, slim and trim etc. by 45% of the urban participants while rural participants did not identify the self in terms of physical characteristics at all. The self was associated with being someone who loves morning walks, different sports and adventures, but the rural adolescents did not mention anything about their physical characteristics.

Religious self: Both rural and urban adolescents do not seem to identify themselves on the basis of religion. However, only two participants from urban background have seen the self as believing in God and one rural participant who believes in all the religions and another one mentioned that he is a Hindu. The self was linked with religious and spiritual aspects in earlier decades but adolescents do not seem doing that now.

Interpersonal attraction, romantic relationships and sexuality: None of the rural participants talked about interpersonal attraction, romantic relationships or sexuality while their urban counterparts see themselves as a girlfriend or boyfriend, have mentioned things that attract them, and one of the participants has also mentioned sexuality saying “*I am not a bi-sexual*”.

Another girl said, “*I am attracted towards boys who can cook.*” “*I am attracted towards boys who love sports and adventure.*”

Desire to achieve versus parental expectation: Some of the female participants from rural background have viewed the self as having a desire to achieve something but their parents not allowing them to do so.

One of the participants said, “*I want to be a fashion designer but my parents have denied.*”

Another one said, “*I need the approval of my parents for finalising my career field. I love my family but my family doesn't support my views.*”

Yet another one said, “*I have boundations (limitations) from my parents.*”

Concerns related to social norms- Seeking change & independence, reducing gender discrimination: Responses of the female participants put forth the social norms, issues of gender discrimination and women safety. Female participants from both the backgrounds, and rural participants mostly, have identified the self as being wanting to be independent, living life on their own terms, disliking gender discrimination and a will to change the views and ideas of society. They want to choose their careers and fields themselves, love if their parents support them and want to be self-dependent.

One of the participants from rural background said, *“I am thankful that my parents are allowing me to study as a lot of parents don’t let their girls do that.”*

Another participant said, *“I can go against my loved ones for the betterment of my own and theirs as well.”*

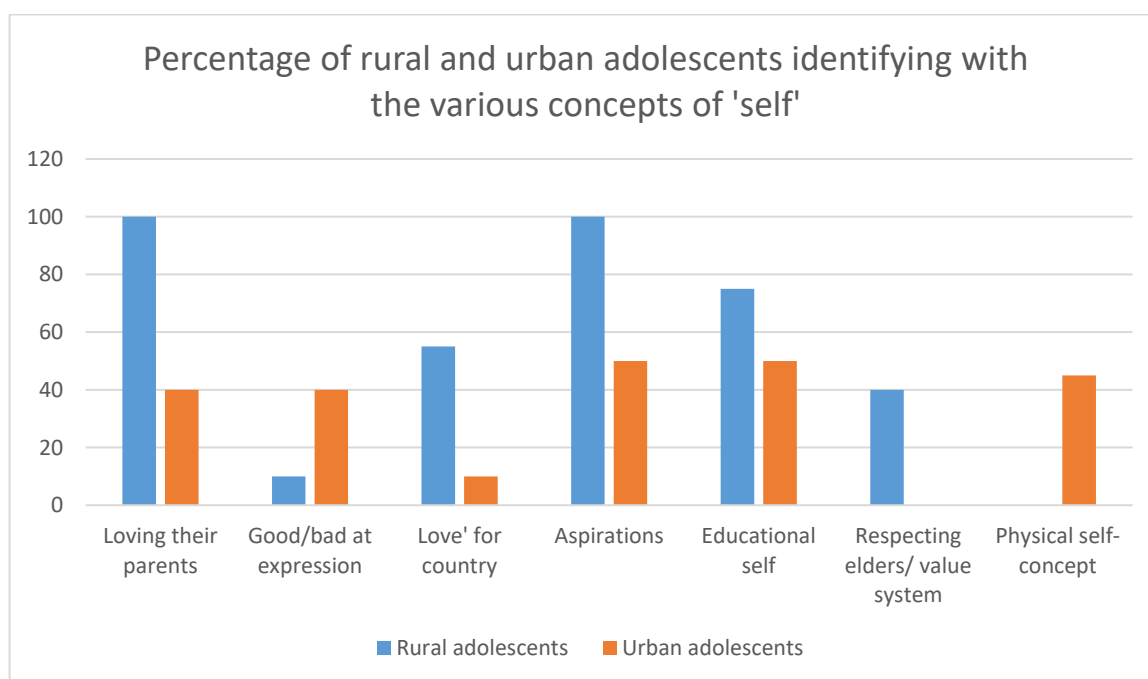


Figure 2. “Percentage of rural and urban adolescents identifying with the various concepts of ‘self’”

4. DISCUSSION

A thematic analysis of the data was carried out. Themes were drawn from the content of the responses given by the participants. The data were first broken down and comparisons were made between responses and conceptualisations were made based on these comparisons.

Rural participants of the present study identified the self as the part of a joint family while the urban participants did not identify the self with this family and social setting. While 100% of the participants from rural context identified the self in the terms of loving their family and friends, only 40% of the urban participants did so. The participants of the rural context, thus, seem to be more inclined towards the interdependent or “us” culture while the urban adolescents seem to be more in line with the independent or “me” culture.

Markus & Kitayama (1991) differentiated between the independent and interdependent self. Western cultures have a faith in the inherent separateness of distinct persons, in becoming independent from others and expressing unique attributes. The self is seen as an independent, autonomous person. Many non-Western cultures, including India, insist on the connectedness of humans. The self is seen as a part of a larger social unit. The self is said to become more meaningful in social relationships. This approach can be seen as the “me” versus “us” approach as well.

Although it is important to be aware that our perceptions and interpretations of the self are influenced by the cultures in which we are raised in and that the meaning of self may vary for different cultures, not everyone from a particular culture shares a common experience. There exist differences within the same culture as well. The result of the present study also show the same. Though India is considered a collectivistic/ interdependent culture as a whole, the different living settings or contexts seem to account for different approaches.

Terms such as *savage*, *mast*, and *jhakkas* have been used by the adolescents to describe themselves in the present study. The youth slang of the Millennial (individuals born between 1980 and 2000) has been used for a description of Selves. The connotations these words have when used by youths are very different from the original meanings of these words. Oxford dictionary defines *savage* as fierce, violent, hostile, wild, uncivilized or primitive. On the other hand, urban dictionary (a crowdsourced online dictionary of slang words and phrases that was found in 1999) defines *savage* as ‘an act that is either cool or hard-core, going beyond the normal scope of the given situation’. These slangs, hence, seem to be an expression of the urban adolescents’ minds, the social systems and the speech community of the speakers. Professor Anne Curzan (2013) of the University of Michigan says, “Slang is a way to reinforce community-to establish who is in a group and to differentiate one group from another.” These slangs may signal a cultural shift of these adolescents from the previous generations.

A generational difference also seems to exist in the way adolescents have described their 'selves'. While the previous generation (Generation X) did not have devices like cell phones, computers etc., the individuals of this generation have been using these devices more or less. This might have changed their views on describing the Selves. Millennials think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors (Prensky, 2001). Technology surrounds the millennials and might dominate their socialization. The use of youth slangs like *savage*, *mast* and *jhakkas* manifests this. The Self has also been described in terms of being or not being on social networking sites.

Rural participants in the present study have equated the Self with their parents supporting them and them being thankful to their parents for doing so. While talking about their future, the rural adolescents have identified the Self as wanting to achieve their goals and making their parents proud, or raising the standards of their households etc. These findings may be rationalized using Naito & Washizu's findings. Naito & Washizu (2015) define gratitude as a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of a benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another (Tsang, 2006) and includes components such as positive feelings, attachment and respect for the benefactor, as well as a wish to repay the benefactor. Indebtedness is a state of obligation to repay another (Greenberg & Westcott, 1983). The rural participants identified their selves as being thankful to their parents for supporting them and helping them and hence they wanted to repay them by making them proud and raising their household standards. The urban adolescents did not mention the self in terms of these concepts.

There was a difference in the responses of adolescents in terms of linking the self with being good and bad at expressing emotions and feelings, or identifying it with their strengths. There is a stereotype that men should not show their emotions and that "real men" do not cry or get upset. Boys did identify the self as not being able to express their feelings properly and they linked the self with expressing their feelings less frequently than their female counterparts. Urban boys from the younger age group (grade 9) did not link the self with psychological aspects while both girls and boys from the older age group (grade 11) were very good at it with some going into great details about it.

Sharma (2014) conducted a research on the self-concept and empowerment of adolescent girls and found a large percentage of women in India who cannot take decisions independently, not even related to their own life. This provides an understanding for the female participants in the present study as well. Rural female participants have identified the 'self' more in terms of

freedom of choice and action to shape one's life and not being able to do so because of bondage from parents.

Responses of the female participants put forth the identification of the Self with having a desire to change social norms, issues of gender discrimination and women safety. Female participants from both the backgrounds, and rural participants mostly, have identified the self as being wanting to be independent, living life on their own terms, disliking gender discrimination and a will to change the views and ideas of society. They want to choose their careers and fields themselves, love if their parents support them and want to be self-dependent. Lohumi & Lohumi (2015) mentioned that women are still denied basic rights in India even though the constitution guarantees equal rights to all the citizens. "Discrimination in education and emphasis on domestic activities, rather than making career has made women's lives full of problems" (Lohumi & Lohumi, 2015). Responses of the female participants in the present study are in line with the study conducted by Lohumi & Lohumi (2015). Female participants seem to oppose the norms and rules at different levels. While some of them oppose authority by not doing what they are asked to (not completing their notebooks) others tend not to like doing household chores or studying.

The self-concept of the present day adolescents, thus, encompasses the pre-defined categories like physical, social, religious and emotional Self; goes on to show the love adolescents have for their country; use of millennial slangs while describing the Self; a desire to achieve and fulfil expectations of parents; seeking independence; questioning social norms and having a wish to change and reform those norms.

5. Conclusion

While the rural adolescents in the present study seem to identify the self with the love they receive from their family, the 'love' they have for their country, their aspirations and being a part of an educational system, the urban adolescents identified the 'self' more with physical characteristics, being good or bad at expressing their feelings, interpersonal attraction etc. These differences in the responses of the rural and urban adolescents display differences in their understandings of self-concept. Though geographical inclusion of Mahendergarh in the NCR has taken place, yet psychological inclusion of the residents on various concepts will take time. The geographical inclusion of a place in a particular socio-cultural milieu, hence, does

not stamp the same understandings of the people of those milieus on various concepts. Self-concept seems to evolve at its own time and pace and the living background of the individuals affects this time and pace they are moving at.

Results of the present study suggest that certain changes have taken place in the way millennial adolescents' describe their 'self.' Use of slangs by these adolescents like *savage*, *mast* and *jhakkas*, identify the self in terms of being or not being on social networking sites, concerns of adolescents related to social norms and seeking change etc. exhibit these changes.

Certain questions arose in the mind of the researcher with the emergence of these new expressions of self-concept. Though past researches have provided an understanding of a platform of self-concept related to physical, social, emotional, religious, educational, existential self etc., under what classification do we categorise the emergence of these new expressions of self-concept? Thus, a need was felt by the researchers to broaden the classification of the self-concept to include these unique expressions of millennial adolescents in order to better define the self-concept. Hence, the present study aimed to assess not only the pre-defined dimensions and areas of self-concept but also tried to discover and unearth the changes in the way adolescents have started identifying with the different aspects of their selves.

6. Scope and limitations

The researcher had to be specific in selecting the sample of the study. This limited her scope to participants between the age ranges of 13 to 18 years. The participants reflected normal development and did not include those with mental health disabilities. Researcher-induced bias could not be avoided, since it was a qualitative study. An effort has been made to minimize this bias by a thorough review of the themes carried out by the research supervisor.

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