

Confidence versus Self-worth in Adult Learning

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process and results of a case study of adult students' need for confidence. A new method of exploring self-esteem and confidence in depth is described and analysed. Results of the study question well-known beliefs about the role of global self-esteem in relation to confidence.

Key words: confidence, self-esteem, development, research, self-knowledge, adult students, learning.

Research was initiated in the Lifelong Learning Department of the School of Education to investigate lack of confidence as one of the most commonly expressed psychological barriers to learning and career decision making among adult students, and to consider possible interventions on the part of the tutors. We believed that in order to influence students' subjective reality (part of which are their needs and concept of confidence), those phenomena should be explored and in a joined inquiry process. The outcome of the research also had to make sense for the students themselves. The obvious way to achieve this was to embark on the journey together and to discover, evaluate and develop their meaning-making process. So the approach took the form of an interpretative (hermeneutic) research in close collaboration between researchers and students. The research comprised several stages, initiated according to the participants' understanding of the explored phenomena. In-depth exploration of each stage would lead to new understanding and new directions for exploring them, which would result in a deeper level of understanding.

The methods employed included focus group discussions, group interviews, a questionnaire and a simple test. The questionnaire and the test were not specifically designed to yield statistical data, but to assist students' reflective thinking. The participants consisted of three groups of students from the School of Education Career Development Programme targeted at women wishing to return to work after a career break and one group from the Employability Programme targeted people after 45 seeking employment. The number of students on these programmes totalled 52 (ages ranged from 27 to 57), 47 of them women and 5 men. Some stages of the research were replicated at a later date with different cohorts of students to expand the range of responses and meanings. In order for me to participate and facilitate discussions on as equal as possible a footing, the specific literature on the key role of confidence in adult education (Cross, 1981; Jarvis, 1996; McGivney, 1990) and self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977; Lent, Brown & Larkin, 1986) was analysed only at the final stage of the research.

The following questions were considered central:

1. How do people identify lack of confidence?
2. What do they understand by confidence?
3. What are the relationships between confidence and other relevant psychological phenomena?

4. What do students think can help them to increase their confidence?

Dealing with experiences and concepts

During the first stage of this research, participants were asked in focus groups to answer the questions:

1. What do we mean by confidence?
2. What builds confidence?

Then, individually they gave their written answers to the third question:

3. Which aspects of the course are increasing (or decreasing) your confidence?

Content analysis of the descriptions of confidence (question 1) given by participants included the whole range of psychological characteristics: attitudes, feelings, behaviour, capabilities, and emotional states - all at a different level of generalisation. In spite of the diversity of these descriptions, analysis showed that characteristics which were identified primarily and most often, were about high self-esteem or, in other words, *'feeling good about oneself'*:

- *"Feeling at ease with yourself"*
- *"Self-acceptance"*
- *"High self-esteem – value one's opinions"*

There were also some attempts to see confidence as *'less self-centred'* and expressed mostly in terms of perceived abilities:

- *"It is belief in your abilities to do the set task"*
- *"Ability to take risk, to rise to challenges"*
- *"Ability to interact, put others at ease"*

At the same time there was awareness of the difficulties in defining confidence:

- *"Confidence can be different things for the same person- different levels?"*
- *"It is not all it seems."*

There were also attempts to explore the concept of confidence in greater depth:

- *"You do not carry emotional 'no' baggage of a crippling nature with you (from teachers, parents etc.), the root of confidence is in very early life"*.
- *"Independence needs confidence and confidence needs independence???. (This is an independence of mind – a kind of self-sufficiency)"*.
- *"There is apparent confidence – like friendliness and genuine confidence – real knowledge (fake it till you make it)"*.
- *"False confidence – depends on props such as qualifications, accent, size, gender, money, image. Prop confidence depends on external factors"*.

So at this stage it could be seen that participants understand confidence in terms of a positive quality, very closely linked with high self-esteem and with different forms of self-assertion. There was also a feeling that this distinction between confidence and self-esteem could be made and that it would help in understanding the whole problem.

The group interviews which followed proved that, at this stage, participants could not separate desired confidence from overall self-esteem. The confident person was seen as someone whose perception of him/herself was as close as possible to the desirable image of him/herself. This is not surprising as many researchers also share the same

belief. “Global self-worth is considered to be an emergent superordinate property that is more than the sum of the domain-specific competencies”(Bandura, 1998). Harter, for instance, treats judgements of self-worth and personal competence as being in a part-whole relationship (Harter, 1990).

To investigate real relationships between confidence and global self-worth, each group of participants were given an opportunity to take part in an exercise designed to evaluate their own self-esteem.

Understanding Self-esteem

The exercise was designed to quantify any discrepancies between ideal self and self-image as a predictor of self-esteem. Each group selected 20 personality traits or self-attributes, which they found important when describing themselves or other people. Then, each person was asked to rank the chosen set of self-attributes to describe their ‘ideal self’ (the kind of person they would like to be). Next, they were asked to rank the same set of self-attributes to describe their actual self or self-image (the kind of person they thought they were). The difference was calculated between the ranks for each self-attribute. The sum of discrepancies for the whole set reflected the level of self-esteem.

Although quantitative analysis was not of paramount importance in this research, it should be mentioned that the participants found that their own results and those of others willing to disclose them were congruent with their own and the group’s perception. The discrepancy between desirable image and self-image was seen as a cause of dissatisfaction.

Models of Changing Self-esteem

It became clear that participants’ understanding of confidence was significantly influenced by their concept of global self-esteem. Consequently, the next stage of the research was designed to look more closely at this concept and what we do to achieve self-worth. The self-esteem exercise had provided participants with a somewhat tangible description of the ideal self and actual self and also equipped them with components for graphical illustration of the relationship between them. This allowed me to offer participants several possible models of harmonising self-concept (Table 1). The principle of the first two is close to the James definition of self-esteem: “the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities”, from which it follows that equilibrium is achieved either by increasing successes (model 2) or by decreasing aspirations (model 1) (James, 1850). Models 3, 4 and 5, observed from the histories of other people’s personal development and also my own, seemed qualitatively different from the first two.

The models were presented in a very schematic way with a brief explanation. In the group discussion that followed, distinctive features of all models were clarified.

1. **Model 1.** Rational re-evaluation or “Decreasing aspiration” (James, *ibid.*), was seen as being applied after some clashes with reality, when self-concept in general is not very rigid and the self is at the beginning of formation. Then, standards set

too high for oneself are seen as unlikely to be achieved, questioned and adjusted to a more realistic level.

2. **Model 2.** Achievement Model or, “Increasing Successes” (James, *ibid.*), implies real actions in order to prove individual self-worth. The self-image ‘improves’ in proportion to closeness to ‘supposed potentialities’.
3. **Model 3.** The Self-discovery Model was seen as substantially different from the first two. First of all, re-evaluation of the ideal self is based not on the improbability of reaching that ideal, but on re-assessing the origin of the ideal in the first place. It often happens that the discovery that the ideal was instilled in us by others, leads to an incentive to find our own values and meaning in life. Secondly, this discovery initiates the search for our ‘true self’ which can then be appreciated and loved as it is, without evidence of closeness even to one’s own ideal. So, in a way, the ideal self and continuously discovered self are moving towards each other.
4. **Model 4.** This model was called the Self-acceptance Model with some hesitation, because this term is widely used within the personal development movement with an unequivocally positive meaning. With this model, a person still has an ideal image and a self-image, but the discrepancy between them is ignored on the basis that the ideal is unachievable or the person is loved and accepted the way he/she is by his/her significant others. Other rational explanations are also possible, but justification for ceasing to invest personal resources not only in self-improvement but also in self-understanding, is common to all of them. Whilst model 4 shares some similarity with model 1, in the case of the latter, the emphasis and energy is focused on re-assessing the ideal self. In model 4 the emphasis is on accepting self-image, and energy is not seen as worth expending at all. In addition, if the Rational re-evaluation Model is more likely to occur at the beginning of self-formation in order to plan future actions in a more rational and effective way, the Self-acceptance Model is more likely to be applied to a person who is ‘tired of life’ in order to release oneself from ‘unnecessary’ commitments.
5. **Model 5.** This model implies those who, as a result of any kind of personal development, think that there is more to this life than can be seen on the surface. They are often engaged in a sort of spiritual quest with the intention of finding the ‘true’ or ‘higher’ self. The main intention is to eliminate the ordinary self or ego through identifying with something significant, such as campaigns oriented towards human values or religious symbols. It should be mentioned at this stage that religious beliefs are not exclusive characteristics of the fifth model. Each model has its own features in relation to faith. For example, the second, Achievement Model may emphasise the commitment to be “as virtuous as God wants me to be”. The faith of someone living the Self-acceptance Model would probably emphasise that “God loves us all as we are”. With the Self-Discovery Model, we are looking for a ‘Divine spark’ within ourselves and so on. However, the specific feature of the Fifth Model is that the self or ego is seen as an obstacle or ‘ultimate illusion’ and is intended to be eliminated by some means. The methods may vary from devotion to a special cause to a serious spiritual commitment and practice. It should also be mentioned that in spite of the main

MODELS OF WORKING ON* YOUR SELF-CONCEPT

NO.	DIAGRAM OF THE MODEL	NAME	DESCRIPTION	SOURCES OF POSSIBLE HELP
Mod	Ideal self / Self image			
1		Rational re-evaluation Model	Questioning your ideal. Becoming more realistic; setting achievable goals.	Books, general information; discussions with ‘realists’, rational thinkers.
2		Achievement Model	Working towards your goals; improving yourself, growing closer to your ideal.	“How to...” books, courses; coaching; what you get from teachers, trainers, mentors (support, knowledge, etc.).
3		Self-discovery Model	Re-evaluation of your values; search for <u>your</u> own ideal; appreciating and loving yourself as you are.	Personal growth field: books, courses, group work, developmental models of counselling, therapy.
4		Self-acceptance Model	Breaking the connection between your ideal and self-image as unachievable. Settling down psychologically.	Like-minded friends, family.
5		Self-reduction Model	Trying to eliminate self (ego), searching for a higher meaning in life.	Fields of spiritual philosophy, psychology; “New age” movement; religion.

Table1.

- Working on one’s self-concept implies that there is no balance between ideal self and self-image. If this balance exists, one has the highest possible level of self-esteem and, consequently, does not need to invest in this work. The models of reaching this state are not explicit. The balance is unlikely to be permanent.

intention of this model to transcend the self with its 'ordinary' desires and ambitions, it remains within the same dualistic trap of striving to become what one is not.

The participants discussed whether they could find any other ways of working with self-concept. The only kind of 'recognisable reality' different from the above models was when the balance between ideal self and actual self was reached. If this balance exists, people have the highest level of self-esteem possible and, consequently, do not need to invest in this work. The models for reaching this state in this case are not explicit. In the opinion of the participants the balance is unlikely to last for a long time.

After group discussion, participants were asked to identify which of the models they thought they were using now and which ones they found interesting and would like to understand better. The results of this survey showed a general shift, from models 2 and 3, mainly used at that time, to greater interest in models 5 and 3. No specific repeatable pattern was found in the dynamic of individual choices.

The general results of the exercise and discussions designed to clarify global self-esteem within focus groups can be summarised as follows:

- Global Self-esteem can be seen as a discrepancy between Ideal Self and Actual Self (Self-image).
- The process of minimising this discrepancy can be manifested through five distinct, recognisable models.
- Although individuals have different dynamics of applying models, it is evident that all individuals change models.
- The succession of models for each individual suggests that the periods of balance and satisfaction are very short, probably because the components of the self-concept are also liable to fluctuation.

In the light of the above observations and conclusions, conscious pursuit of enhanced self-esteem appeared to be quite a difficult and energy consuming task. Numerous examples were also found of the fragile nature of self-esteem. In spite of the diversity of models used and levels of self-esteem, participants shared a very similar lack of confidence in applying for a job. This lack of confidence, however, affected their confidence in other areas of life in a very different way. This discovery made us question the assumption about the global character of self-worth and stimulated us to clarify our concepts of confidence and self-esteem and, if possible, to find the root of their confusion.

Defining confidence and self-esteem

At this point, we decided to find acceptable working definitions of confidence and self-esteem. In contrast to the cognitive character of self-efficacy expectations (belief in one's eventual ability to perform a given action) (Bandura, 1977), the participants in this research had emphasised the affective side of the confidence phenomenon. Confidence was defined as a feeling: "feeling of certainty in one's ability to deal with a task". On the other hand, global self-esteem or self-worth was defined as "feeling good about oneself". The roots of the confusion between the two concepts in

common use may perhaps be partially explained by the fact that both are connected with feelings. Bandura also claimed that “the inappropriate equation of self-esteem with perceived self-efficacy has both methodological and conceptual sources” (Bandura, 1998). In spite of the results of the research, which proved, using quantitative methods, that “...self-efficacy was not simply reflecting global self-confidence...” (R. Lent, S. Brown and K. Larkin 1986, pp. 268), the idea is still widely used by contemporary researchers and authors.

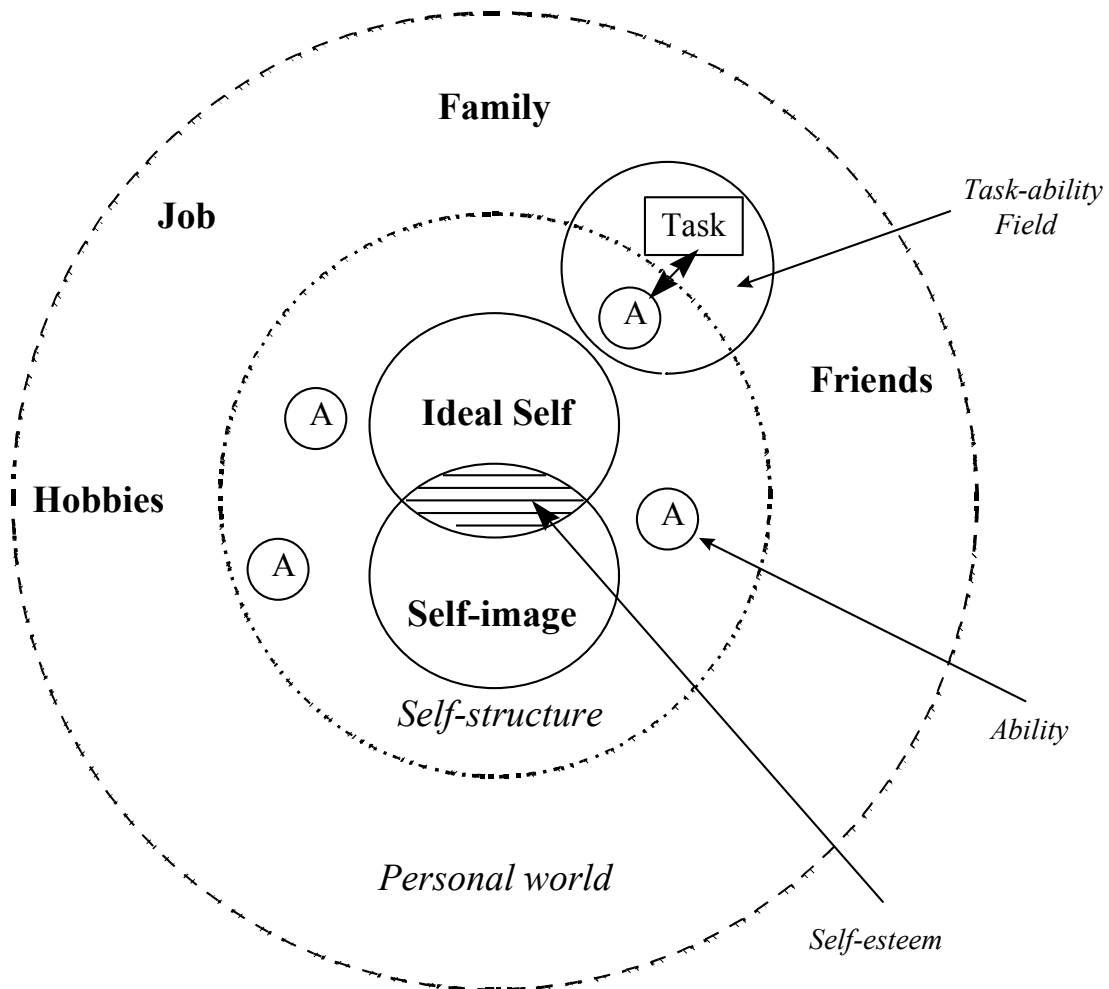


Fig.1 Confidence and Self-esteem fields in one's personal world

The next step in our research was to clarify the difference between confidence and global self-esteem, which we illustrated graphically in fig.1. The confidence realm is slightly outside the personal structure with the focus on a particular task and corresponding ability. A person could be confident in performing one task but not

confident in another. Gaining more confidence in dealing with one task does not automatically lead to being more confident in dealing with another.

In contrast, the self-esteem realm seems to occupy a different position. As we found, the self-esteem realm does not cover the whole personal structure. Nevertheless, it has a central character because of the unique place of the self within the structure. This central position assumes, perhaps, its importance in comparison to the rest of one's personal world. The positions of these psychological phenomena or their importance in the personal structure determine the amount of attention and energy allocated to them affecting, as a result, one's actions and the effectiveness of the actions.

In order to illustrate the effect of differences in the position of the self or self-esteem in comparison to the rest of one's personal world in real life situations, two examples were discussed:

1. **Person A**, with a self-centred orientation and high self-esteem, prepared a presentation on a topic about which she was knowledgeable. She was well equipped in terms of presentation skills and had a good understanding of her audience. She was very confident in her ability to present the topic. The material was delivered perfectly and the audience was full of praise about her and her performance.
2. **Person B** was also well prepared with the necessary presentation skills and knowledge of her topic and the audience. However, self-esteem and confidence were not at the centre of her concern, because the subject of the presentation was so important to her that all her energy was invested in it. The topic was delivered with her undivided attention and the audience immediately engaged in a long and passionate discussion on the subject, without paying particular attention to person B's performance.

Although rather fine, the borderline between the actions of person A and person B seemed observable and recognisable to participants. Some characteristics of A-oriented and B-oriented people were also formulated by participants within the focus groups and outlined in Table 2.

A-oriented person	B-oriented person
<i>Self-esteem is very important.</i>	<i>Absorbed in life task, but with full attention and not in a mechanical way.</i>
<i>Self takes a lot of attention. There is a need for success and fear of failure.</i>	<i>Forgets about oneself. Attention is paid to life task but doesn't become a doormat, because it does no good to the task.</i>
<i>Can be easily hurt by criticism, because self-image is of high importance. There is a need for psychological security.</i>	<i>Not hurt by criticism because listens to anyone and anything which helps to improve one's work.</i>

Table 2

In order to clarify participants' understanding of the two orientations above, an attempt was made to extract from all initial descriptions of confidence only those which describe B-oriented people. Participants were given a task in small groups using a chart of 45 characteristics of confident people, produced by them during the first stage of the research, to indicate which characteristics they would more likely apply to a B-oriented person and less likely to an A-oriented person. The next list (Table 3) represents 11 descriptions, which were indicated by three and more of the small focus groups, including the actual number of groups that chose each description.

Characteristics of B-oriented people	Number of groups, which indicated it
1. <i>inner peace</i>	8
2. <i>accepting your failings</i>	6
3. <i>self-acceptance</i>	5
4. <i>not burdening yourself with feelings of inadequacy</i>	5
5. <i>not carrying emotional 'no baggage'</i>	5
6. <i>independence of mind (a kind of self-sufficiency)</i>	4
7. <i>accepting criticism without feeling personally affronted</i>	4
8. <i>interacting as oneself</i>	4
9. <i>self-awareness (capabilities and limitations)</i>	4
10. <i>lack of fear (of new things, failure)</i>	3
11. <i>feeling at ease with yourself</i>	3

Table 3.

Having analysed these characteristics we saw that some of them could form a group and they could all be arranged into a logical structure presumably on a cause-and-effect basis (Fig.3), although this assumption is open for argument. What is obvious from this material is that seven characteristics (2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11) describe, in different forms, feelings and attitudes towards personal failure. Such emphasis suggests that this group may represent a core of differences between the A-oriented and B-oriented person. The general idea of this group clearly shows the irrelevance of failure for the B-confident person. This conclusion may be applied also to success, because success-related characteristics were also not chosen.

This attitude to a failure-success dimension seems to generate *inner peace* and *ability to interact* in combination with *independence of mind* and *self-awareness*. The link between irrelevance of failure-success and independence of mind is obvious, bearing in mind that we are conditioned by our social environment to want to succeed and liberation from this conditioning brings understanding of the real cost of the 'success-failure' idea.

Self-awareness allowing one to see *one's capabilities and limitations* as well as other facts of one's psychological reality provides a B-oriented person with grounded information, without which one is prone to be affected by different influences and illusions, based again on an idea like 'failure-success'.

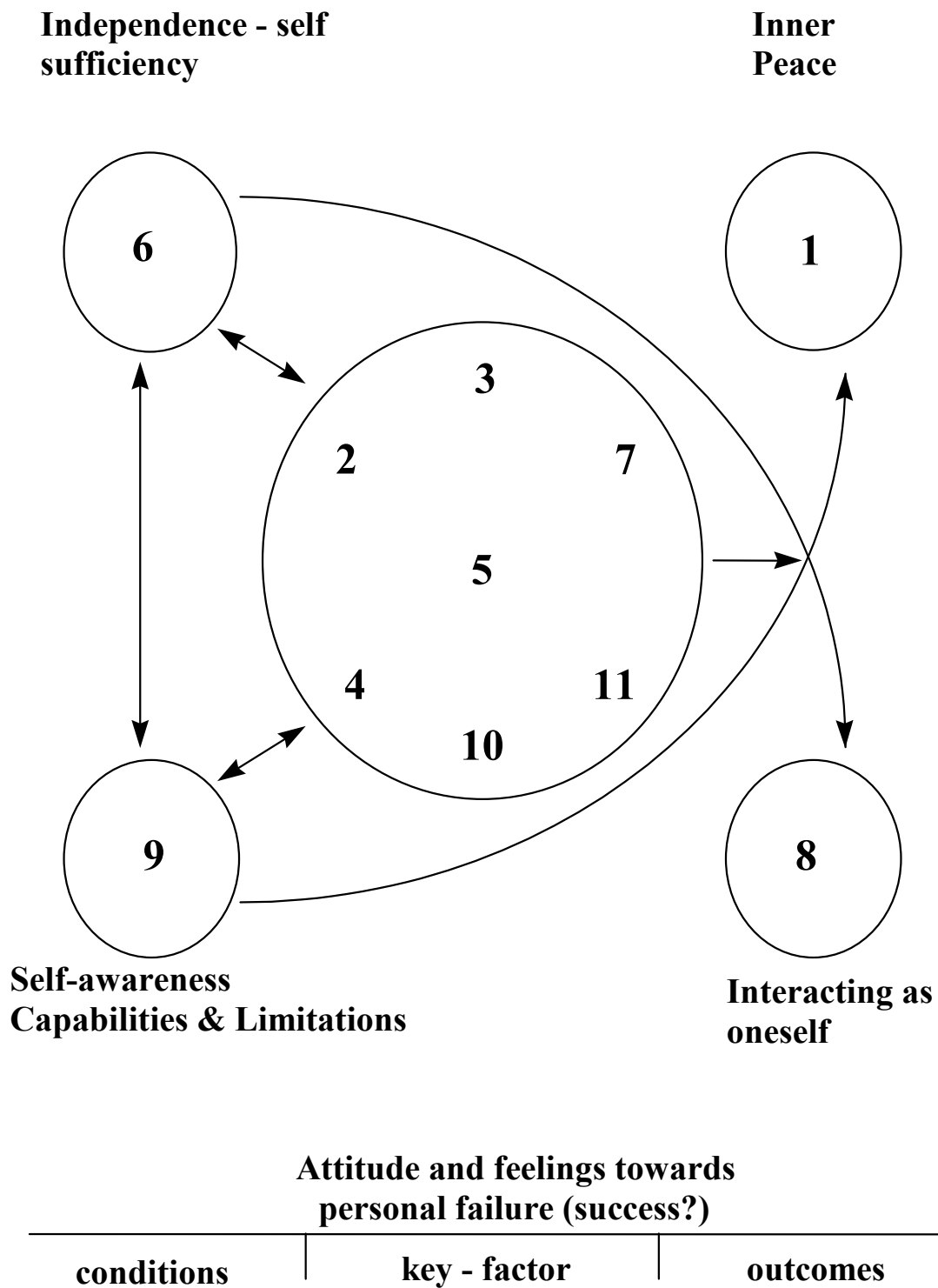


Fig.2 Structure of personal characteristics describing a B-oriented person

Comparing this set of qualities with the remaining characteristics not chosen for the B-oriented person we found that their central aspect was *high self-esteem* which, naturally, implies the importance of personal success, as self-esteem is based on the achievement of closeness of the self to the ideal self.

Analysis of other remaining characteristics presents quite a coherent picture of an A-oriented person. For instance, *belief or faith in one's ability* may serve as a sort of self-conditioning to boost high opinion of oneself. As any other belief, faith or belief in one's abilities is irrational and so should be supported by more rational means such as *security, belonging, familiarity with the situation, and being in control*. These rational conditions also play an important role, because high self-esteem is a very fragile concept and constantly suffers from the clashes with reality and its different challenging situations. In contrast to the *self-awareness* of a B-oriented person as an important condition for objectivity in self-evaluation, an A-oriented person requires *positive thinking*, which is in fact, self-manipulation, and also needs constant calculation of *realistic goals* to balance the effect of excessive positivity.

In terms of skills and level of performance A-oriented and B-oriented people may not differ considerably, although, a B-oriented person probably does not need *self-presentation* as a very secondary matter for selfless personality. In addition, the emotional outcome of a B-oriented person: *inner peace* that was particularly emphasised by eight groups of participants points to an internal source of harmony. In comparison, *being satisfied* and *happy* of an A-oriented person may have not only an internal but also and more likely an external source.

Therefore, an investigation of the nature of A and B orientation to self-esteem and its central position has shown that the majority of characteristics distinguishing B-oriented people from the A-oriented may constitute a group. Its distinguishing feature is the describing of feelings and attitudes towards personal failure.

As far as confidence is concerned, both an A-oriented person and a B-oriented person can be confident. In this case their behaviour may differ very little. However, their emotional reaction to lack of confidence and their resultant behaviour will be obviously affected by their orientation.

What are the implications of this knowledge?

One of the implications of defining confidence and self-esteem as feelings led us to question whether either self-esteem or confidence can be influenced or manipulated directly. As far as confidence is concerned and the way we defined it as the feeling of certainty in one's ability to deal with a particular task, the only logical way to gain this certainty genuinely is to practise or continue to learn supported by appropriate feedback until one has the ability to deal with the task. The emphasis in this definition of confidence is on the task-ability relationship, and, feeling is a reaction to this.

It is however, much more difficult to influence the level of global self-esteem or self-worth as feeling good about oneself because:

- a) it belongs to the psychological realm without a straightforward connection between cause and effect;

- b) it is global and so depends on too many factors;
- c) it is not stable because the elements of self-esteem are constantly changing.

With regard to the operational relationship between confidence and global self-esteem, the initial assumption that the close link between them existed was seriously questioned. As a deeper understanding of the nature of self-esteem and confidence developed, it became apparent that the relationship between the two is not free from contradiction.

When these qualities are already developed the behaviour of the person with high self-esteem closely resembles the behaviour of the confident person. However, when these qualities are not yet developed the implicit orientation for the development of self-esteem may impede the process of confidence development. Individuals with a pronounced tendency to acquire and sustain self-worth inevitably devote a significant amount of energy and attention to this, diverting energy from action itself and/or from the learning process, both of which we identified as objective and important conditions for building confidence.

An understanding of the controversial relationship between confidence and self-worth, affected by the orientation on importance of self-worth may allow for a more rational and responsible choice of strategy. The choice and influencing capacity of other “traditional” means of building confidence consequently depend on the above orientation.

The analysis of the actual factors influencing the level of participants’ confidence during the course indicated that natural, favourable conditions for building confidence are the actual learning process, overcoming difficulties, and positive constructive feedback from tutors:

- *“Being on my work placement has encouraged me greatly. Being given tasks to do alone and the staff believing that I can do the work and trusting me solely...”*
- *“Identifying that I do have skills”*.
- *“Pushing yourself to do exercises that you may well have given up on”*.

However, open communication, discussions and sharing ideas and feelings in a group and personal discoveries associated with the process were mentioned practically by every participant:

- *“Being part of a group who are having similar experiences rather than sitting alone at home thinking, “I’m the only one”*.
- *“Thinking and talking about myself; listening to new ideas; having people listening to you; feeling you are making a positive contribution”*.
- *“Discovering that my predicament does not make me a “Failure”. There are many intelligent and otherwise capable people with much the same concerns and worries as me”*.

It showed that even if participants’ orientation was to improve global self-worth, these conditions which in fact serve to increase self-understanding, have a positive influence on personal development. It is also possible to amplify these conditions by using the results of this research in specially designed group work.

Although the nature of psychological needs makes the differences discussed very subtle, awareness and understanding of this controversial relationship between different personal orientations and related strategies can assist tutors with their choice of interventions.

It was also apparent that the approach used for this research has actually contributed to the increase of participants' self-understanding and confidence and was reported as being intellectually stretching, and joyful and meaningful experience. That gave us an indication that this approach could be successfully applied to the most complicated psychological issues where the result of the exploration can have an impact on people's lives. Apart from mutual benefit during the research process, this approach presents a clear way of closing the well-known gap between research and its users.

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