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The Self-Identified Problems of College Students

By JOHN A. BATH

INTRODUCTION

Analyses of college students' problems have been made from time to time for various purposes. One of the primary motives seems to have been to use such information to improve counseling services.

Both Carr (1) and Stone (4) used the Mooney *Problem Check List* as the source of information about student problems at the college level. Carr compared the problems of 300 superior college students with 300 inferior students. Although superior students had fewer problems, they had an equivalent number in seven of the eleven problem areas when compared with the inferior students. Superior students were more concerned with long-range problems, while problems concerned with adjustment to college were more characteristic of the inferior group.

Stone's (4) analysis of the *Problem Check List* given to 578 students in all four classes in a teachers college showed that problems concerned with adjustment to college work ranked first in number and seriousness. Least prevalent and least serious were problems of 1) morals and religion and 2) home and family. Sophomores identified the greatest number and juniors the smallest number of problems in the four classes. Women listed a far greater number of problems than did men.

Hunter and Morgan (3) used a personal interview form consisting of 78 items in seven problem areas. They employed a sample of 100 college men and 100 college women selected proportionately from all four classes. They, too, found problems to be more prevalent among the women students. A significant sex difference in responses was found for 56 of the 78 items. Eleven of the 78 listed problems were identified by one-fifth or more of the total group.

Tate and Musick (5) restricted their study to the personal adjustment problems of 92 college students enrolled in a Marriage and Family Relations course. Of the 98 problems in the schedule, 19 were rated as problems by 50 percent or more of the group. Most prevalent problems concerned understanding of, and relationship with, the opposite sex. The particular sample used might explain the latter finding.

This study grew out of a course in The Psychology of the Ado-

lescent at the Iowa State College. During a unit on counseling, some discussion was devoted to ways and means of identifying problems of adolescents. In consideration of a problem check list as one useful instrument, and as an appropriate way to provide the students with first-hand knowledge of the instrument, every class member filled out a problem check list. The information so collected provided the data for this study.

PROCEDURE

During the spring quarter, 1957, 139 students enrolled in a course in *The Psychology of the Adolescent* responded to the *Personal Inventory*, College Edition (2). The inventory is a listing of 300 briefly stated problems, divided into 10 areas of 30 statements each. The instructions advise the student that there are no right or wrong answers. They are told to blacken one space on their answer sheet for major problems and a second space for minor problems. Those statements that represent no problem are to be left blank.

The class was composed of 71 males and 68 females, the vast majority of whom were juniors and seniors. A variety of curricula were represented among the enrollees. About three-fourths of the enrollees came from either the Division of Home Economics or the Division of Agriculture. The inventory was filled out during one of the regular class sessions.

RESULTS

The major results are shown in the three tables which follow. Table 1 indicates the prevalence of problems by area, the greatest number of problems being in *finances-living condition* and *social-recreational*. Least frequently marked were problems concerning *home and family*. There were four times as many problems in the Rank 1 area as in the Rank 10 area, as indicated by percentage figures in Column 2. Columns 3 and 4 show the rank order by area of major and minor problems. The only change from the rank order of total problems in Column 1 is some minor shifting in the first five problem areas. The greatest difference in rank order appeared in problems concerning *adjustment to college work*. These problems ranked first as major problems but only fifth as minor problems. The last column shows something of the degree of troublesomeness of problems in various areas. For example, although *adjustment to college work* ranked third in total number of problems, proportionately more of the problems in this area were serious ones as compared with those problems judged to be minor ones.

Table 1
Prevalence of Problems by Area
(N = 139)

Problem Area	Total Problems Rank Order	%	Major Problems—Rank Order	Minor Problems—Rank Order	Ratio of Minor to Major Problems
Finances—Living Condition	1	16	3	1	5.1 to 1
Social and Recreational Adjustment to College Work	2	15	2	2	4.4 to 1
Personal-Social Relationships	3	12	1	5	2.4 to 1
Curriculum and Faculty	4	12	4	4	3.7 to 1
Health	5	11	5	3	4.1 to 1
Morals and Religion	6	9	6	6	4.0 to 1
Vocational and Educ. Adjustment	7	8	7	7	3.6 to 1
Relationships with Opposite Sex	8	7	8	8	3.6 to 1
Home and Family	9	6	9	9	4.2 to 1
	10	4	10	10	6.6 to 1

How prevalent was identification of the same problems? Table 2 shows the number of problems identified by one-fourth or more of each sex. Major and minor problems were combined for purposes of this analysis. The area of *finances-living conditions* includes the largest number of frequently identified problems. However, of the six problems for males and seven for females, only three were common to both sexes. As noted by the totals in the table, females identified half again as many high-agreement problems (marked by one-fourth or more) as did the males. In this analysis of most prevalent problems, there was no problem that was common to five of the areas for one-fourth or more of the students.

Table 2
Number of Problems Identified by One-fourth or More of Students
(Male = 71; Females = 68)

Problem Area	Number of Problems		
	Identified by Males	Identified by Females	Common to Both Sexes
Finances—Living Conditions	6	7	3
Social and Recreational	5	6	3
Home and Family	0	1	0
Relationships with Opp. Sex	0	1	0
Health	0	4	0
Morals and Religion	0	1	0
Personal-Social Relationships	2	6	2
Adjustment to College Work	6	3	2
Vocational and Educ. Adjustment	1	0	0
Curriculum and Faculty	3	5	3
TOTALS	23	34	13

Listed below are the 13 problems common to both sexes (See Table 2) which a minimum of one-fourth of each sex identified.

- 1 Tiring of same meals all the time
2. Needing a job during vacations
3. Not enough money for clothes
4. Not enough time for recreation
5. In too few student activities
6. Too little chance to read what I like
7. Taking things too seriously
8. Lacking self confidence
9. Unable to concentrate well
10. Slow reading speed
11. Too many poor teachers
12. Classes too large
13. Too much work required in some courses

Sex differences in problems are shown in Table 3. Problem areas are listed in the order which they held in the inventory booklet. Two of the ten areas failed to show a significant difference according to chi square test, those being *home and family* and *vocational and educational adjustment*. One of the areas shows a difference significant at the .01 level, while four are significant at the .001 level.

Females had significantly more problems than males in the six areas of *social and recreational, relationships with opposite sex, health, morals and religion, personal-social relations, and curriculum and faculty*. Males had significantly more problems in the two areas of *finances-living conditions* and *adjustment to college work*.

Table 3
Sex Differences in Problems

Problem Area	No. of Problems Identified			Chi ²
	By Males	By Females	Total	
Finances—Living Condition	346	277	623	5.827*
Social and Recreational	290	329	619	5.203*
Home and Family	72	93	165	3.808
Relationships with Opp. Sex	99	164	263	20.281***
Health	156	212	368	12.191***
Morals and Religion	118	173	291	13.879***
Personal-Social Relationships	205	258	463	9.645**
Adjustment to College Work	275	221	496	4.291*
Vocational and Educ.				
Adjustment	161	134	295	1.554
Curriculum and Faculty	193	264	462	14.056***
TOTALS	1920	2125	4045	

*Significant at .05 level
 **Significant at .01 level
 ***Significant at .001 level

DISCUSSION

Since the sample of Iowa State College students included in this study was not randomly drawn, generalization to the college population is not justified. From the sample used in this study, with the assessment instrument employed, the following observations are offered.

College female students have more problems than do the males. This is in keeping with the findings of Stone (4) and of Hunter and Morgan (3) mentioned earlier. The mean number of problems per student was 29. This is 10 per cent of all problems listed in the inventory and is suggestive of need for personal and group counseling.

Although the subjects of this study were juniors and seniors, the most serious of their problems had to do with adjustment to college work. Again, this finding is in agreement with Stone (4) who found that problems concerned with adjustment to college work ranked first in number and seriousness among all problems.

At a time when many accusations are being directed toward the home for its shortcomings with youth, there is some comfort in the finding that the smallest number of problems for each sex was in the area of *home and family*. At any rate, these students indicate proportionately few such problems. Stone (4) found the same problems were least prevalent.

Hunter and Morgan (3), who analyzed sex differences by item, found a significant difference on two-thirds of the items. In this study, the two sexes differed significantly in eight of the ten problem areas, suggesting need for some differential treatment of problems for the two sexes. That is, group counseling would impose some limitations if used with heterosexual groups.

Some of the areas of prevalent problems are perhaps a result of the occupational hazards of a college student. For example, complaints about food, living quarters, finances, insufficient time for recreation, courses, and faculty are likely pretty common to a college population in almost any setting. Nevertheless, their problems deserve consideration with every effort made to alleviate them.

It would appear from results of this study, as well as of others, that insufficient attention is being given to student orientation by college authorities. In view of the great burden to be assumed by a counseling center of a large college in attempting to make its services readily available to as many students as apparently could profit therefrom, some alternative seems appropriate. Since many of the problems identified are of a type that might be handled satisfactorily in class groups, a course in Adjustment to College would seem to be

in order. Short of this possibility might be the alternative of devoting more time in the first course in psychology to the problems that are known to bother large numbers of students, assuming all or nearly all students would take the course early in their college career.

SUMMARY

The *Personal Inventory* was administered to 139 students, principally juniors and seniors, at the Iowa State College. In order of prevalence from most to least, for both sexes combined, were problems involving: 1) finances-living condition, 2) social and recreational, 3) adjustment to college work, 4) personal-social relationships, 5) curriculum and faculty, 6) health, 7) morals and religion, 8) vocational and educational adjustment, 9) relationships with opposite sex, and 10) home and family.

Although a wide variety of problems was identified, 23 problems were checked by one-fourth or more of the males and 34 problems were checked by the same proportion of females. In general, female students identified more problems than did the males. Where there were significant sex differences in number of problems, females exceeded males in six out of eight areas.

On the average, the students checked four times as many major problems as minor problems. The rank order of major problems did not differ substantially from rank order of minor problems in any given area. The greatest shift in rank was four positions.

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