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The Relationship of Peer Acceptance, Acceptance of Others and Self Acceptance¹

By SEYMOUR L. ZELEN

In recent clinical psychology there has been an increasing tendency to link self acceptance with the capacity to accept other individuals. Much of this movement has been led by Rogers (1949) and his students (Sheerer, 1949; Stock, 1949) using the phenomenological approach. It has been pointed out by Raimy (1948) that individuals who have been successfully counseled tend to shift markedly from a preponderance of self-disapproval to self-approval. Sheerer (1949) following this approach established that a substantial correlation exists between acceptance and respect for the self and acceptance and respect for others. Berger (1952) and Stock (1949) working within the same "non-directive" framework confirmed Sheerer's findings. Using a different orientation, Horney (1937) similarly concluded that those individuals who do not conceive of themselves as being an object of another's love are themselves unable to love others. Calvin and Holzman (1953) have demonstrated that the more poorly adjusted the individual, the more self-depreciative, relatively, he appears. Stock (1949) suggests that with increasingly better adjustment both self acceptance and acceptance of others increases.

The data used to establish this relationship have been gathered almost exclusively in the therapeutic interview, mainly of the client-centered type. While no doubt is being cast on the validity of these data and results, it might be worthwhile to utilize other techniques which might also attempt to verify this relationship. Such an attempt was the study by Calvin and Holzman (1953), which used peer and self rankings on traits as measures of inferred and self-concepts

A second and distinct problem, but one which seems to be intimately associated with the first problem, is the relationship of both self acceptance and acceptance of others, to peer acceptance. Does a high degree of self acceptance and acceptance of others imply reciprocity on the part of one's peers? Do individuals of high

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peer status tend to have a more positive concept of themselves as well as a greater liking for others? Many a maladjusted person seems to be trying desperately to "win friends and influence, etc." yet fails miserably in any popularity poll of his peers.

MEASURES

Sociometric ratings lend themselves admirably to the evaluation of the interrelationships of peer acceptance and acceptance of others. Using the Bonney Sociometric technique (Bonney, 1946) in which every group member rates every other member on a five point preference scale, it is possible to derive scores not only of peer acceptance, i.e. popularity, but also of the ratings a person characteristically tends to give fellow group members, i.e. his acceptance of others. For purposes of this study, the operational definition of peer acceptance is the total score achieved by an individual on this sociometric, and the total of the ratings which each of the subjects assigned to his peers is the measure of acceptance of others. Self acceptance is measured by the extent of the expressed positive or negative feelings made about one's self in response to the question "Who are you—tell me about yourself," (Bugental and Zelen, 1950).

SUBJECTS

These techniques were then administered to three sixth-grade classes having a total number of eighty-three. Boys out-numbered girls slightly in each class—there being a total of forty-six boys and thirty-seven girls. All three classes were in different schools of the same industrial community of 80,000 in Iowa. The mean age of the group was 10 years 9 months.

RESULTS

The Pearson Product Moment correlations between the measures of peer acceptance and acceptance of others was .56 on the first administration and .58 on the second administration, eight weeks later, both significant at greater than .01 level. Since the Who Are You technique yielded responses which could only be classified dichotomously, as positive or negative self referents, biserial correlations had to be employed in the analysis of these results. The biserial r between the measures of peer acceptance and self acceptance was .30 significant at the .01 level, while the biserial r between the measure of acceptance of others and the measure of self acceptance was + 0.03, highly nonsignificant.

DISCUSSION

This study confirms the expected correlation between peer acceptance and acceptance of others. It appears that a liking for others and being liked by others are highly reciprocal characteristics, or that the individual with high status in a group finds many of the group members highly acceptable.

In another study which seems to have treated sociometric data similarly, Jennings (1943) reports correlations ranging from a significant r of .30 to an insignificant correlation of .12 for peer acceptance and acceptance of others. The results of the present study should not be interpreted as being contradictory of Jennings's findings, even though these correlations were much higher than anything Jennings found and her correlations seemed to decline with increased acquaintance between group members.

The Iowa group had been in the same classes with each other, with minor exceptions, for almost five and a half years. On retest eight weeks later the correlation remained substantially the same, .58. One likely explanation of this difference is that the two samples were from different populations. The population reported in this study consisted essentially of "adjusted" school children of both sexes living at home. Jennings's population knew each other for a much shorter period of time, and was drawn from the New York State Training School for Girls. They were delinquent children operating in a single sexed community.

It is important, therefore, to emphasize that the present results indicate a definite, high relationship between acceptance of one's peers and being in turn accepted by them.

The positive relationship between self acceptance and peer status while relatively small was significant. It suggests that there is a small but stable relationship between the way a child perceives himself and the way his peers perceive him. Apparently a child who has positive feelings about himself is better able to devote his energies to the group activities and to cooperate more fully with others. The child with negative self percepts must be constantly on guard against new threats from others.

The lack of any relationship between self acceptance and acceptance of others seems to run contrary to that which has been theoretically predicted. This may be due to the insensitivity of the measures; yet both measures yielded the expected relationships in other comparisons. A more logical explanation might be that this postulated relationship is dependent on "insight" or understanding of others while the previous relationships seem to be de-

pendent on behavior. It is possible that children might be aware of and capable of reacting to external behavior, but would not be aware of the cues upon which the more subtle social relationships like "insight into others" is based.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Eighty-three sixth grade children were given the Bonney Sociometric to measure peer acceptance and acceptance of others and the W-A-Y technique to measure self-acceptance. Highly significant correlations of .56 and .30 respectively were found between peer acceptance and acceptance of others and between peer acceptance and self acceptance. For all practical purposes there was no relationship between the measures of self acceptance and acceptances of others.

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