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Childrearing Attitudes of Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents

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Journal of Consulting Psychology



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Childrearing Attitudes of Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents¹

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OVER THE last decade there has been an increasing interest in objectively studying childrearing attitudes, and research findings indicate the profitableness of investigating general qualities of parent-child relationships (9) rather than specific infant care practices (6).

Among these recent studies, Shoben (8) has demonstrated that mothers of children in mental hygiene clinics and juvenile courts are more possessive, dominating, and ignoring than mothers of normal children. Freeman and Grayson (2) applied Shoben's attitude scales to mothers of schizophrenics, concluding that these mothers are also more possessive and ignoring, and more subtly dominating than mothers of normals. Mark (5), using similar items, found mothers of schizophrenics to be mainly restrictive and controlling, though also ambivalently devoted and detached in their attitudes. Read (7) has related overcontrolling maternal and paternal childrearing attitudes to poor nursery school adjustment. Harris, Gough, and Martin (4) have shown that mothers of prejudiced fourth to sixth graders have more authoritarian, rigid, and intolerant childrearing attitudes than mothers of less prejudiced children. Finally, Block (1) has demonstrated that measured attitudes toward childrearing are related to more or less stable personality characteristics. Fathers who expressed restrictiveness in attitude were found to be overcontrolling of their own needs as well as external circumstances, essentially dependent and repressing, and subject to feelings of inadequacy. More permissive fathers were more assured and confident, stable without being rigid, and more capable of standing by their own convictions.

¹Reprinted from *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April, 1957.

²The author wishes to express his appreciation to Richard N. McFeely, Headmaster of the George School, for his assistance in the obtaining of the control group data.

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In interpreting his findings Block refers to previous research by Frenkel-Brunswik (3) in which ethnocentric adolescents describe the ideal father as being, among other things, strict and punitive. Block then speculates that these adolescents, hampered in the development of their personal identities and integration of their personalities, may eventually become restrictive fathers like those in his study. He adds that such restrictive fathers may still lack in themselves a feeling of personal integrity and so tend to treat their own children the way they themselves were treated by their own threatening fathers. Block then concludes that such a father, acting upon the residue of his own childhood anxieties, is revenging himself upon the wrong generation, and a cycle of personality transmission is thus perpetuated.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate directly the childrearing attitudes of emotionally disturbed adolescents. Specifically the goal was primarily to determine whether the childrearing attitudes of emotionally disturbed adolescents suggest a perpetuation of attitudes found to exist in parents of disturbed children, and secondarily to evaluate any obtained differences in the light of adolescent adjustment and maladjustment.

SUBJECTS

The experimental groups consisted of 34 males and 32 females attending a residential school servicing emotionally disturbed children. Utilizing the standard American Psychiatric Association nomenclature, 33 of the total of 66 experimental subjects were diagnosed Personality Trait Disturbance, Personality Pattern Disturbance, or Sociopathic Personality Disturbance. Of the remaining, 10 were diagnosed Psychoneurotic Disorder, 10 Psychotic Disorder, 6 Transient Situational Personality Disturbance, and 7 Chronic Brain Syndrome with varied secondary reactions.

The control group consisted of 34 males and 45 females attending a normal residential school. Both groups were adolescents, equated for age, socio-economic level, and parental educational background.

METHOD

An attitude survey was employed, similar to those used in the previous research mentioned above. It consisted of 64 items chosen on the basis of their discrimination value in previous research on parental attitudes. All items were classified by a psychiatrist, two psychologists, and a social worker working together, according to the system devised by Mark, such that four subscales emerged:

(1) restrictive control (29 items), (2) ineffectual control (13 items), (3) excessive devotion (13 items), and (4) cool detachment (12 items). Each subject was required to strongly agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree, or strongly disagree with each item. The questionnaire was presented as an "opinion" survey, in which various high schools were being asked to cooperate. To lessen the possibility of ego-involvement the subjects were not required to identify themselves and the survey was administered by school personnel.

Each item response was weighed, such that *strongly agree* was assigned a weight of 4, *mildly agree* 3, *mildly disagree* 2, and *strongly disagree* 1. The experimental and control groups were then compared on each of the four subscales through the use of the *t* test. Also *chi-squares* were determined for each item individually. Experimental males and females were compared with control males and females respectively, no male-female comparisons being made.

RESULTS

On the *restrictive control* subscale, the experimental groups (both sexes) were found to differ significantly from the control groups in the direction of greater restrictiveness and overcontrol (.05 level). No significant differences were found on the other three subscales. Significant *chi-squares* (.05 level or better) were obtained on 14 items for the boys, 5 items approaching significance (.10 level). There were 14 significant items for the girls, 1 approaching significance.

In order not to sacrifice the flavor of the differing responses made by the experimental and control groups, the essence of the items significantly differentiating between the male groups are presented below:²

On those items in which the two groups expressed completely opposing attitudes, the emotionally disturbed adolescents felt that a parent should see to it that their child plays only with the right kind of children, that children should be taught that their parents always know what is best, that a child should always believe what his parents tell him, that arguments among children are best not handled by the children themselves, that a good child would never allow a parent to go to a home when he is old, and that a child who disobeys his parents is ultimately punished in some way.

²The items significantly differentiating between the female groups are not included to conserve space, although the flavor is essentially the same.

On those items in which normal adolescents were evenly divided, the disturbed adolescents felt that a child should consult his parents before making decisions, that a child cannot get his own way by ignoring parents and doing what he pleases, that children who obey parents make the best adults, that a child should not be allowed to go to any Sunday school his friends go to, and that in planning home activities, the interests of the children are the most important things.

On those items in which the disturbed adolescents were evenly divided, the normal adolescents felt strongly that a child should be allowed to choose his own religious beliefs, that parents should not supervise a child's choice of playmates, that children need not stay within calling distance of their parents, that children should not accept the religion of their parents without question, that strict discipline does not develop fine strong character, that a child seven years of age is not too young to go to camp, and that a child should have an allowance to be spent without consulting his parents.

DISCUSSION

The present results lend support to the hypothesis that childrearing attitudes are perpetuated in the case of overcontrolling and restricting attitudes, but not in the case of attitudes reflecting ineffectual control, excessive devotion, and cool detachment. At least two general conclusions may be drawn from the absence of supporting evidence in the latter cases. On the one hand, these general attitudes may not be perpetuated in any direct sense, but rather influence facets of adjustment other than those tapped here. On the other hand, it is possible that these attitudes are perpetuated, but (1) their expression (at least in adolescence) is too subtle for such a questionnaire to pick up, or (2) they become manifest as relatively organized totalities only in postadolescent years. Whatever the ultimate answer, it is clear that emotionally disturbed adolescents do not express more obviously ineffectually controlling, emotionally smothering, or rejecting childrearing attitudes than is average for their age group.

Turning to the positive findings, the present results lend support to Block's speculations regarding the perpetuation of restrictive childrearing attitudes in males. Certainly the emotionally disturbed adolescent males in this study exhibit many of the same personality traits exhibited by Block's restrictive fathers: lack of self assurance and confidence, feelings of dependency and need to control threatening feelings, inflexibility, inability to stand alone against group decision, etc. Also, these adolescents suffer from the same lack of self definition and personal integration as Frenkel-Brunswik's ethnocentric adolescents. The picture one

gets, then, is of a cycle of events, in which overcontrolling and restrictive attitudes are handed down from father to son within a matrix of emotional disturbance. One important part of this matrix would appear to be an identification with those aspects of parental personality which lie at the base of attitudes toward others, and subordinates (children) in particular. The present results and those of past research also support such conclusions in the case of females and their relationships with their mothers.

Appraising the present results in terms of any light they might shed on the nature of adolescent adjustment and maladjustment, there is indication that emotionally disturbed adolescents, much more than normal adolescents, feel a strong need for parental or parental-surrogate imposition of external controls. They seem to feel a stronger need to conform to what they see as parental values and standards of right and wrong, and they experience more than normal guilt when they disobey the authority of parental mores. The suspicion of the existence of guilt derives from the response to one item, in which disturbed adolescents felt that a child who disobeys his parents "is ultimately punished in some way," whereas normal adolescents disagreed. The implication of inevitability of retribution for misdeeds despite the passage of time reflects the probable depth of feeling involved in the desire for external standards and anticipated consequences of misconduct.

Considering these facts, it might be said that the supposed adolescent *rebellion* is less characteristic of emotionally disturbed adolescents than more normal adolescents—that, at least, overt behavior labeled as rebellion in these children is not a positive drive for independence and a search for new values. Rather, it would more likely seem to be a confused and perhaps rather guilt-ridden search for self definition, in which the desire for parental standards and approval is too easily confounded with fear of (and perhaps hatred toward) the very sources of those values they seek and desire so strongly. In this light, it is interesting to note again that Frenkel-Brunswik's ethnocentric adolescents not only saw the ideal father figure as strict and punitive, but also perceived discipline as being threatening, traumatic, and overwhelming. If all this be true, one perhaps can see more clearly some of the bases for the adolescent emotional turmoil spoken of so frequently by workers in the field.

SUMMARY

Employing an attitude survey, the childrearing attitudes of disturbed and normal adolescents were compared for both sexes. The survey consisted of four subscales: (1) restrictive control, (2) ineffectual control, (3) excessive devotion,

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and (4) cool detachment. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the childrearing attitudes of disturbed adolescents suggest a perpetuation of the attitudes found to exist in parents of disturbed children, and to evaluate any obtained differences in the light of adolescent adjustment and maladjustment. The results indicated that disturbed adolescents of both sexes express significantly more restrictive and overcontrolling childrearing attitudes than do normal adolescents. No differences were found on the other three subscales.

The results are discussed in the light of previous research findings relating to the question of the perpetuation of childrearing attitudes. Also discussed is one apparent aspect of adolescent relations with parental figures, with comments regarding adolescent *rebellion*.

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