

The Self-Image and Wish Patterns of the Underachiever

Arthur G. Storey and Ronald B. Clark

SUMMARY

This study set itself the task of investigating the self-image and wish patterns of Grade VII underachievers as compared to those of their achieving peers. The findings indicate that underachievers are significantly more assertive and socially oriented than achievers, and that the latter show greater hostility and affective involvement. Underachievers wish to change in the direction of less social involvement and greater effectiveness, while their achieving counterparts wish for less effectiveness and greater social involvement.

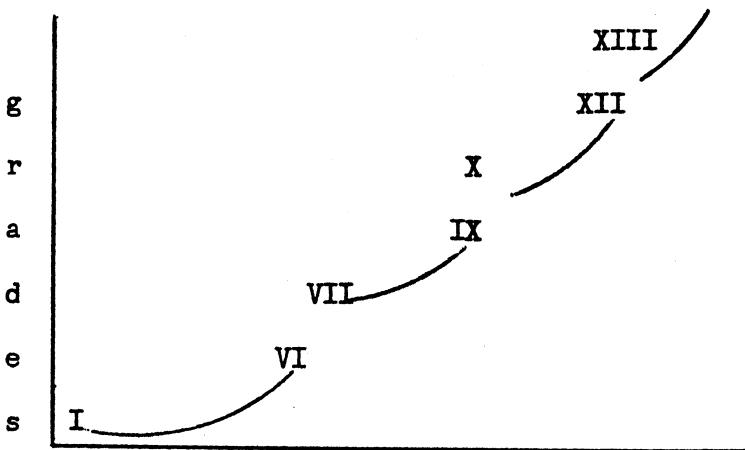
THE PROBLEM

Personality theorists writing both before and after the advent of Allport's extensive work of 1937¹ have maintained that human personality is in large measure a function of the individual's environment and his interaction with it. The role of motivation or endeavour in personality development probably reached its apogee with the work of McClelland² and his colleagues. Havighurst's concept of developmental tasks and the role they play in personality growth would seem to express the trend currently in vogue³. Certainly Maslow's⁴ general concept of the role of motivation and achievement in personality development would contain little to contradict Havighurst or McClelland. Coleman⁵ also stresses the importance of motivation and achievement in personality or, for him, self development.

To the extent that any such sample of personality theorists is right, one might expect to find some measurable correlates between

personality or self development and success and failure, or achievement and nonachievement. Following this reasoning and utilizing a Q-test created for the purpose, Storey investigated the effects of school acceleration and deceleration on some six areas of self and ideal-self development⁶. His findings indicated that when a task is slowed or speeded in a controlled, socially accepted manner to accommodate able and less able children who are motivated to perform that task, the results are beneficial in terms of self development. His more recent study,⁷ designed to investigate the effects of success and non-success in young adult male students, revealed that success is positively related to affective involvement while non-success relates to hostility. This study also revealed that one of the wish outcomes of long term school attendance, regardless of the degree of success, seems to be a desire for increased effectiveness achieved at the expense of social involvement.

Both of these studies were, however, concerned with the relatively long term effects of environment. The question investigated through the present study pertains to the effects of non-success over a much shorter period of time. This non-success phenomenon arises for a proportion of students largely because the gradient of progressive school tasks is neither linear nor continuous. Instead, it is best described as curvilinear in an anti-clockwise direction with breaks at the Grades VII, X and college entrance levels. Diagrammatically it might be represented as:



It is largely because of the nature of this gradient, then, that a given student may be achieving satisfactorily at one level but begins to exhibit underachievement in the early stages of the next. It may be either because he is unable to bridge the gap between the two levels and/or because he is unable to produce at the increased rate demanded at the higher level.

For the purpose of the present study it is assumed that, if there are any self development repercussions resulting from what may be a shock or minor trauma of this relatively sudden and unexpected failure to achieve, they will be most easily detected at the Grade VII level because the subjects are still in the formative stage of development and because their defences against adversities are not yet fully operative.

SUBJECTS AND TESTING

At the conclusion of the first reporting period after some ten weeks of the school year has elapsed it is customary in a number of Calgary, Alberta schools for a committee consisting of at least the principal, guidance counselor, and home room teacher to identify those students who are underachieving. Students so selected are referred to the counselor for interview and guidance. The total number of Grade VII students so referred in a representative Calgary Junior High School comprises the experimental subjects for the current study. The control group consists of a random sample of their peers who were not considered to be underachievers.

Both the i (I am) and w (I wish I were) forms of *The Q-Tags Personality Test*⁸ were administered to both experimental and control subjects as a non-segregated group. Form i was given first with form w following four days later in order to compromise between memory for card placement in the i sort and change in the phenomena measured before the w form was administered. TABLE I gives the results obtained from this testing.

TREATMENT OF DATA

An analysis of variance treatment of the data given in TABLE I indicated that there were significant intergroup differences ($P < .01$) in the mean i sort scores. The same technique indicated the presence of significant intragroup differences ($P < .01$) in mean w sort scores. *t*'s or critical ratios of the differences were then calculated in order to locate specific areas and magnitude of these differences.

TABLE I
Q-TAGS SCORES OBTAINED ON BOTH GROUPS

TEST FORMS	Factor	GROUPS							
		<i>Experimental</i>				<i>Control</i>			
		Girls N = 20		Boys N = 20		Girls N = 35		Boys N = 31	
	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
i	<i>Affective</i>	48.1	8.53	46.9	9.61	60.5	8.46	62.9	8.97
	<i>Assertive</i>	59.0	6.08	61.6	8.87	45.3	7.97	43.1	7.41
	<i>Effective</i>	52.5	7.27	53.1	7.25	53.5	8.62	55.1	8.19
	<i>Hostility</i>	48.1	8.31	47.2	9.77	61.9	10.10	63.9	7.89
	<i>Reverie</i>	54.9	10.35	52.9	8.46	57.5	9.18	52.7	7.34
	<i>Social</i>	63.5	6.02	63.6	6.88	44.7	9.39	45.7	7.94
w	<i>Affective</i>	49.9	5.66	46.9	8.66	59.1	7.17	61.6	8.25
	<i>Assertive</i>	64.3	8.22	63.2	8.17	45.1	8.68	44.4	7.73
	<i>Effective</i>	59.7	6.13	61.2	8.79	47.4	8.13	45.8	7.46
	<i>Hostility</i>	48.0	7.45	43.6	8.82	59.6	7.65	60.5	6.93
	<i>Reverie</i>	48.9	3.38	52.4	6.36	57.9	6.26	56.6	7.80
	<i>Social</i>	54.6	7.02	54.5	8.02	54.5	6.21	56.6	7.59

TABLE II
SIGNIFICANT INTERGROUP DIFFERENCES IN i
SCORE MEANS IN TERMS OF t

FACTOR	GIRLS		BOYS	
	Underachievers	Achievers	Underachievers	Achievers
<i>Affective</i>		5.14** ↑		5.97** ↑
<i>Assertive</i>	↑	6.92**	↑	7.74**
<i>Effective</i>		5.31** ↑		6.44** ↑
<i>Hostility</i>				
<i>Reverie</i>				
<i>Social</i>	↑	8.66**	↑	8.84**

↑ indicates group scoring significantly higher
** significant at or above .01

Since, as per the data given in TABLE II, the experimental and control subjects "wished" from different "I am" bases, it is not appropriate to compare the intergroup wish scores. However, a comparison of intragroup i and w scores might reveal some worthwhile insights.* TABLE III gives those intragroup mean differences which proved to be different from each other.

TABLE III

t's OF MEAN i VERSUS MEAN w SCORES FOR ALL SUBGROUPS

FACTOR	UNDERACHIEVERS		ACHIEVERS	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
<i>Affective</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<i>Assertive</i>	w 2.31	_____	_____	_____
<i>Effective</i>	w 3.38	w 3.19	i 3.05	i 4.67
<i>Hostility</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<i>Reverie</i>	i 2.46	_____	_____	w 2.01
<i>Social</i>	i 4.30	i 4.36**	w 5.15	w 5.53**

i — difference favors i mean

w — difference favors w mean

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data compiled in TABLE II indicates that both under-achieving girls and boys described themselves as more assertive and socially oriented than do their control peers. The controls describe themselves as more affective and hostile than do their under-achieving peers. These significant differences between the two groups would seem to suggest a difference in task orientation. The underachievers would seem to be concentrating on being assertively social while their achieving grademates' affective and hostile in-

* Since an assumption of equal intragroups i and w factor scores is not tenable, it is not appropriate to consider the score differences reported in TABLE III as statistically significant in spite of the fact that they are reported as t's. When norms for the Q-tags instrument have been established, one might test for significance of differences of various scores from such norms. In the meantime, the differences reported in TABLE III must be interpreted as differential points in a profile for which norms have not been established.

volvement was probably motivating them to greater academic effort. That is, the group that was to underachieve began junior high school with an effort to make friends, while their peers, driven by emotional involvement (affect and hostility), concentrated on their learning tasks.

The lack of satisfactions obtained from, or a change in the belief of the rightness of, this "I am" state of affairs would seem to be inherent in the wish changes expressed through the data contained in TABLE III. Here again the underachievers and achievers differentiate between their two groups to a high degree. Underachievers of both sexes seem to wish for greater effectiveness and less social involvement; wishes that seem to indicate dissatisfaction with their concentration on being assertively social. The girls in this group also wish for still greater assertiveness (now probably in an academic direction) and less involvement in reverie.

In contrast to the underachievers, those who are achieving satisfactorily want to trade some of their effectiveness for greater social involvement which seems to suggest dissatisfaction with their concentration on academic work.

Boys in the achieving group wish for greater reverie involvement, while underachieving girls wish for less distractions of this nature.

It is interesting that members of neither group nor any of the sex subgroups wish to change their degree of affective or hostility involvement — the two areas that differentiated them through their i sort scores.

A logical conclusion for the school and its counselor to draw from the findings of the present study would seem to be that underachieving Grade VII students might be profitably oriented in the direction of greater emotional involvement in academic tasks accompanied by a corresponding withdrawal from social pursuits. At the same time achievers might be cautioned against concentrating on the achievement of their wish for greater social involvement.

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