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Senior Girls' Appearance and Social Acceptance

This examination of senior-year data from a longitudinal study of the same class of high school girls from the ninth through the twelfth grades confirms that clothing plays an important role in the teenager's ability to establish adequate self-identity. However, little agreement was shown in the underlying values and opinions expressed concerning why clothing is influential in social acceptance.

We have two types of groups here. In one group, dress is important more from the standpoint of being neat and clean. You must also have a nice personality, interest in school, and be willing to go along with the crowd, as long as it doesn't hinder your own ideas. In the other group, you should be a good dresser, neat, something like a showpiece, and really built. You must not have your own opinions, or be a leader, as others would reject it; you must be a willow. This group looks for what they can gain. . . . Thus one senior girl characterized the groups in her class in terms of the importance of clothing and appearance for social acceptability.

Research findings have demonstrated the importance of clothing and appearance in the social acceptance and participation of adolescents (1,2,3,4). A discussion by Wax indicates that as the adolescent girl searches for a self-image with which she can be comfortable, she is preoccupied with experimentation with her appearance (5). Social scientists also suggest that the period of adolescence involves continued socialization and a search for self-identity in preparation for an adult role (6,7,8). "As human beings within a society develop social selves, dress and adornment are intimately linked to their interacting with one another. These personal accompaniments assist the individual in presenting his image and expressing himself." (9)

The extent to which group membership influences the life of an individual has been the subject of

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several studies. Festinger and his associates indicated that groups which are highly attractive to members are highly cohesive (10). To accomplish its goals, a cohesive group will exert extensive pressures on members to maintain group standards. (11)

The purpose of the study reported here was to investigate the relationship between group cohesion and the opinions of twelfth grade girls about clothing, appearance, and social acceptance. This research, a facet of a longitudinal project, paralleled another phase conducted by Williams and Eisdorfer, when the same girls were ninth graders (12). The working hypothesis of the previous research guided the present portion: Members of the same reciprocal friendship structure have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance which contribute to group cohesion, and their opinions differ from those of non-group members or members of other groups. However, for analyzing the twelfth grade data, the former hypothesis was divided into segments and restated as follows:

A. Members of individual reciprocal friendship structures have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance.
B. The extent to which members of individual reciprocal friendship structures have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance is positively related to the cohesion of the group.
C. The similar opinions of members of individual reciprocal friendship structures regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance differ from the opinions of members of other reciprocal friendship structures.
D. The similar opinions of members of individual reciprocal friendship structures regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance differ from the opinions of non-group members. (13)

The report is presented in three sections: methodology, data analysis, and conclusion.

METHODOLOGY

Population. Respondents in the study were 158 girls, the entire population of twelfth grade girls in the only high school in a midwestern community. The proximity to a large university made the community atypical in regard to the amount of education, level of incomes, incidence of white-collar occupations, and high geographic mobility of the residents. The school was chosen for the longitudinal research project because some students from a lower social class residential area also attended it, thus providing a situation for observing social class extremes.

Social class. Social class ratings were determined by Warner's Index of Status Characteristics (14). Three indices were used in this research: occupation of father, house type, and dwelling area. The weight assigned to certain educational occupations was modified, due to the atypical educational structure of the community.

Instruments. The data were obtained using two instruments, a background questionnaire and an open-ended interview schedule. The background questionnaire was designed to obtain personal information about the girl and her family, such as father's occupation and educational level, number of club memberships, and the girl's best-friend choices. The interview schedule sought the opinions of the girls about general acceptance, clothing, and appearance.

Sociogram. The responses to the near-symmetric questions in the background questionnaire and interview schedule, which are designed to elicit best-friend choices, were coded and used to construct the sociogram shown in the accompanying diagram. Each girl is represented on the sociogram by a circle containing her code number, with reciprocated choices represented by lines connecting two circles. Also indicated in each circle is the girl's social class rank.

The sociogram shows three distinct categories of social acceptance defined as follows:

Isolate: an individual who had no reciprocated choices
Mutual pair: a reciprocated choice of only two members
Reciprocal friendship structures (RFS): three or more individuals with at least one reciprocated choice each who form a cluster or "group"

1 The longitudinal project in progress, sponsored by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, is titled "Adolescent Girls: Viewpoints from Ninth through Twelfth Grade Concerning Social Acceptance, Dress, and Related Factors."
The term reciprocal friendship structure was used in lieu of the term clique, as some of the structures are too complex to be classified within accepted sociometric definitions of a clique (15). The diagram shows the positions of the 136 girls who comprised the population of this study. The girls made choices resulting in ten RFS's containing from 3 to 28 members. Each RFS was assigned a number for purposes of identification. There were 102 RFS members, 30 isolates, and 16 mutual pair members.

Cohesion Index. An index of cohesion was obtained for each RFS by dividing the number of actual choices (both reciprocated and nonreciprocated) made within the RFS by the number of possible reciprocated choices for the group, that is, the number of choices which would have been made, had every member of the group chosen every other member. The formula is as follows:

\[ C = \frac{X}{(N-1)N} \]

C indicates cohesion, X equals the number of choices made within the group, and N equals the number of group members. \( N-1 \) accounts for the fact that a person cannot choose herself. With N representing the total number of individuals in a group and \( N-1 \) representing self, \( N-1 \) indicates the total number of group choices an individual can make.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed to determine whether or not the members of the different reciprocal friendship categories and specific RFS's differed in background and in opinions on clothing, appearance, and group acceptance.

Background factors. When the three categories of social acceptance were cross-tabulated against several background factors, distinct differences emerged for the population. Isolates ranked lower than members of the other categories in all aspects of social class ranking. The RFS's, with the exception of one predominately lower social class group, were almost entirely upper or middle social class. The majority of all girls, including 90 percent of
the isolates, had attended elementary school in the community. Only one RFS had a majority of members who had attended elementary school outside the community. The majority of the population were Protestant, but relatively more mutual pair members were Roman Catholic. An analysis of grade point averages showed that mutual pair members and isolates tended to have higher averages, including a greater percentage of honor roll members, than did RFS's.

Opinions on clothing, appearance, and group acceptance. The analysis of response to the interview schedule was formulated by using the concept program and review as developed by Stone. Review is defined as "responses made about the wearer of clothes by others," and program as "responses made about the wearer by the wearer." (16) Some questions elicited a consensus. For example, from the review aspect, the majority of the population agreed that clothing influenced a girl's popularity in their high school. "First impression counts" was the most frequently mentioned explanation for the influence clothing had on the popularity of a girl. One girl summarized the appraisal of a new student as follows: "Dress is considered first before they get to know her, personality, later, and then general attitudes and beliefs." Even though there was consensus that clothing influenced a girl's popularity, the majority of the respondents said that the clothing of the popular girls did not differ from the clothing of the other girls. A typical statement was, "No, the majority of the people here are really good dressers. But if it's really extraneously 'out,' extreme, then this would have a negative effect on popularity."

Recognition of the well-dressed majority included an awareness of some classmates who were "not dressed right." All reciprocal friendship categories agreed that there were twelfth graders who were "not dressed right." Awareness of the reason for poor dress was summarized by one respondent when she stated, "It's nothing she should be blamed for, it's mostly her environment."

When asked about their own groups, most girls stated that the perceived membership group was about average in dress as compared with other groups in school and that their own friends "dressed right." The girls also agreed that other classmates did not judge a girl by the manner in which her best friend dressed.

In the interview aspect of the investigation, most girls categorized their group as average in dress. The program aspect of the study also revealed that the majority of all girls appraise their clothing as average in comparison with that of their classmates. Personal appearance, including hair, clothes, and complexion, was considered satisfactory. In fact, they reported that clothing had never made them ill at ease or caused embarrassment at school, and many said that compliments were sometimes received. Yet many expressed a desire for changing some aspect of self. One girl said about the desired change, "I'd look better." Another stated, "It would be easier to be accepted." That certain clothes gave more confidence than others was mentioned by some respondents. Color-coordinated pastel separates and matching accessories, the widely accepted "uniform" at the time of the study, were mentioned often as most desirable to give self-confidence to the wearer.

Although consensus was noted in responses to some questions, the girls in the three reciprocal friendship categories expressed different opinions. In some instances, two questions which elicited the different responses were: "What are the characteristics you use in choosing a friend?" and "Whose approval of your clothing means the most to you?" RFS members indicated that personality was a characteristic they used in choosing a friend. However, isolates said, "She should have the same interests I do." Mutual pair members noted that "having the same interests," "friendliness," and "the way she acts" were equally important considerations in choosing a friend.

Although many girls initially indicated that self-approval of clothing was most desirable, importance was also placed on the approval of parents, boy friends, or girl friends. Isolates mentioned parents most often; mutual pair members placed equal emphasis on the approval of parents and self; and RFS members said that the approval of a boy friend was desired.

Self-satisfaction was the reason most frequently given for valuing self-approval of clothes. The reasons given for valuing the approval of another individual included "good taste, respect opinions," "tell you what you look best in," "makes me feel good," and "spend most of my time with friends." RFS members placed more emphasis on "good taste," whereas isolates and mutual pair members said, "They tell you what you look best in."

Mothers made suggestions about school clothes,
at least some of the time, to the majority of the girls. However, a larger percentage of the isolates than RFS or mutual pair members reported that their mothers made suggestions. Almost all girls who received suggestions said that the suggestions would be followed “sometimes,” or “if I agree with her.”

**Appraisals of popularity and dress.** The respondents were asked to name the girls in their class they considered “most popular,” “best dressed,” and “not dressed right.” The girls’ perceptions of popularity and social acceptance, for many of the girls who were named as “most popular” were also named as “best dressed.” Eighty-eight percent of the isolates chose as best dressed were group members and few were isolates. Members of RFS 407 (see diagram) received half of the “most popular” choices and a third of the “best dressed” choices, thus emerging as the leading crowd. Self-appraisals and appraisals by others coincided in the “most popular” choices made and received by the members of RFS 407.

Although 73 percent of the girls said either that in their grade there were no girls who were not dressed right or that they did not know the names of any such girls, 22 were named a total of 39 times as “not dressed right.” Thirty-five percent of the individuals named as “not dressed right” were isolates, and 27 percent were members of RFS 401, the predominantly lower social class RFS. Program and review certainly did not coincide for RFS 401. Even though members of this group were often named as “not dressed right,” the members expressed self-satisfaction with clothes, did not desire a change in self, and expressed the opinion that all their friends were well-dressed.

**Hypothesis testing.** Of the restated hypotheses, only one segment, Hypothesis B, was tested with inferential statistics. Using the Spearman rho correlation, the RFSs were rank-ordered on cohesion and agreement of clothing opinions. The correlation between cohesion and agreement was significant beyond the .01 level of probability, supporting the hypothesis that: *The extent to which members of individual reciprocal friendship structures have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance is positively related to the cohesion of the group.*

Data for the other three hypotheses were not amenable to inferential statistics; therefore, only percentages were used. Hypothesis A, members of individual reciprocal friendship structures have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance, received 36 percent support, because the RFSs expressed similar opinions only 293 out of a possible 774 times.

Hypothesis C, the similar opinions of members of individual reciprocal friendship structures regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance differ from the opinions of members of other reciprocal friendship structures, received 21 percent support. Only 81 of the 293 within-group agreements differed from the agreements of other groups.

Hypothesis D, similar opinions of members of individual reciprocal friendship structures regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance differ from the opinions of non-group members, received almost 50 percent support as the RFSs averaged 16 agreements per group and the isolates and mutual pair members, considered non-group members, agreed half as many times.

**CONCLUSION**

The teenage girls in this population agreed on the basic questions concerning the important role which clothing played in their school; however, there was no consensus concerning why it was evaluated as influential in group acceptance. The girls agreed that clothing influenced a girl’s popularity at their school, but there was little agreement as to the underlying values and opinions expressed concerning the reasons for the influence of clothing.

Since senior girls who were “popular” were frequently “best dressed” and usually group members, one might conclude that a teenager’s preoccupation with her clothing and appearance is not superficial to a teenager who is concerned about peer group acceptance. It is important that parents and educators understand that clothing can serve as an essential “prop” for the teenager as she attempts to establish an adequate self-identity in her advancement toward womanhood and a fully responsible role in the adult world.

**REFERENCES**


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CHILD CARE TRAINING GUIDE

Child Care and Guidance—A Suggested Post High School Curriculum, recently published by the U. S. Office of Education, presents a course of action for those planning to train post-high-school students as child care assistants. The basic materials in the bulletin were prepared by Winona L. Morgan and Patricia H. Greene of the Pennsylvania State University under a contractual arrangement between the University and the U. S. Office of Education, as authorized in the Vocational Education Act of 1963. An advisory committee of eight persons, representing agencies and professions concerned with the care and guidance of young children, assisted in the selection and organization of the original materials.

These basic materials then were circulated to state education officials in February 1967 and to 40 home economists enrolled in a summer training institute at Florida State University in July 1967, which also was funded by the Vocational Education Act of 1963. Under the direction of Ruth J. Dailes, the home economists met to interpret and plan for the use of the curriculum guide in junior college child development curricula and in other types of post-high-school wage-earning programs.

The program described in this guide emphasizes the importance of high quality training and competent personnel needed in all areas of child care and guidance and orientates persons to the jobs available in hospitals, schools, camps, playgrounds, and homes for trained child care assistants and prepares them for satisfying employment as assistants to qualified teachers.

Contents of the manual cover all aspects of establishing and maintaining a two-year or shorter training program. Included are sections on duties of staff personnel, necessary equipment, selection of students, methods of student evaluation, setting up a laboratory nursery school, and suggestions for follow-up studies and placement services for graduates. A bibliography, list of films, and sources of pamphlets and periodicals are included. Six appendices providing suggested course outlines, a sample curriculum and follow-up questionnaire, lists of inexpensive materials and of equipment, program costs, and a glossary complete this comprehensive manual.

This 42-page bulletin, the culmination of the combined Pennsylvania State and Florida State efforts, is available for 40 cents from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.