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## CLOTHING OPINIONS AND THE SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE PROCESS AMONG ADOLESCENTS<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Mary Bishop Littrell and Dr. Joanne B. Eicher<sup>2</sup>

Upon entering school, the child's focus shifts from his family to his peer friendship group, the change becoming more evident in the adolescent years (1). At the same time, in adolescence clothes seem to assume their greatest importance (4). Recognizing that adolescents regard clothing and social acceptance as *very important*, one is not surprised to learn that clothing has been found to be related to social acceptance among adolescents. Hendricks (2) reported that opinions about clothing, appearance and social acceptance differ among peer friendship groups and between peer group members and isolates.

Although research has shown peer acceptance to be important among adolescents and clothing to be related to peer acceptance, the following statements suggest still another factor to investigate in the relationship between clothing and adolescent peer acceptance. The statements are answers by three girls in a ninth grade class to the question: If a new girl came to your school and wanted to get in with the popular girls, what would be the best way to do this?

"When a new person arrives at the school they are either accepted or rejected immediately. They are accepted or rejected because of their manner of dress, general looks and the way they conduct themselves. Therefore, it would be wise for a new girl to pay attention to all three of these criteria."

"She should direct her interests toward the popular groups by dressing as well as they do. Also by always having her hair carefully styled and her appearance impeccable."

"If she manages to wear the same type of clothes that the popular groups are seen in, this would enhance her chances of being accepted by them."

These answers suggest that clothing is more than just a factor which differentiates individuals who have become accepted in peer friendship groups from those not accepted. The answers suggest that clothing may also be important for the adolescent who is trying to become a group member.

<sup>1</sup>Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station Journal Article No. 4623.

<sup>2</sup>This study is a part of a larger project sponsored by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station which is titled "Ninth Grade Girls' Attitudes and Behavior Related to Role, Appearance, Social Class and Group Acceptance," and is under the direction of Dr. Joanne Eicher and co-directed by Dr. Eleanor Kelley.

Although the quoted answers suggest that clothing is related to becoming socially accepted, findings from recent studies do not place primary emphasis on the part that clothing may play in the *movement*<sup>1</sup> of adolescents from social isolation to social acceptance. Therefore, with *movement* as the major interest, the general question guiding the present research was formulated: Are opinions about clothing and appearance important in the process of movement from social isolation to social acceptance? The question more specifically related to the methodology of the research was: Do adolescent girls who desire membership in particular peer reference groups and who have opinions about clothing and appearance similar to those of the group become members of the desired groups? Attention was thus focused on examining the relationship between opinions about clothing and *movement* from social isolation to social acceptance. Because we could not observe the actual day-to-day dress of the girls we studied their opinions about dress rather than actual dress.

From the guiding question, the following exploratory hypotheses were formulated:

- Hypothesis I— Patterns of clothing and appearance opinions distinctive to peer friendship groups within the entire ninth grade class of girls would differ from each other and from the overall class patterns of clothing and appearance opinions.
- Hypothesis II— Isolates who have similar clothing and appearance opinions to those of the peer reference groups would become members of the peer reference groups to which they aspire.

The guiding question and hypotheses were based on research about reference group theory. As defined by Merton (Hyman, 1960:387) reference groups are those to which an individual relates himself by taking the values or standards of the group as his own through a process of evaluation and self-appraisal. The individual may or may not have membership in his reference group. However, in attempting to attain membership in a reference group, an individual tends to express the attitudes, values and behavior of the group prior to interacting with the group (3). The main objective of this study was to determine whether individuals expressing opinions about clothing and appearance similar to those of their reference groups were more likely to become members of their groups than were individuals who did not express similar opinions to their reference groups.

<sup>1</sup> Movement as used in this study refers to change in sociometric classification from one school year to the next school year.

## METHODOLOGY

Prior to this study and as a part of a larger project, data had been collected for the same class of girls over four successive years in a large midwestern high school. The longitudinal data thus collected made possible the investigation of *movement* between friendship groups over the span of one year.

Two forms of data collection were used. A background questionnaire containing a single sociometric question seeking best friend choices was administered. Best friends were defined as "the people with whom we share secrets and spend most of our time." Data from the background questionnaires were used to develop yearly sociograms showing only reciprocated friendship choices and the resulting sociometric classifications of isolates, mutual pairs, and reciprocal friendship structure members (RFS members).

The sociometric classifications, as defined in the overall project, were:

*Reciprocal Friendship Structure* (RFS): a sociometric diagram of individuals whose choices of friendship were returned.

*Mutual Pair* (MP): a reciprocated choice of two members, hence a dyad.

*Isolate* (I): an individual who had no reciprocated choices on a sociogram. Four categories of isolates were:

- Isolate<sub>1</sub> (I<sub>1</sub>): Pure isolate; made and received no friendship choices.
- Isolate<sub>2</sub> (I<sub>2</sub>): Ignored isolate; made choices but received no choices.
- Isolate<sub>3</sub> (I<sub>3</sub>): Self isolate; made no choices but received some choices.
- Isolate<sub>4</sub> (I<sub>4</sub>): Confused isolate; made and received choices, none of which matched.

In a second form of data collection, the class members were interviewed as ninth graders and again as twelfth graders concerning their opinions about clothing, appearance, and social acceptance. Only the ninth grade data from the larger project were used in the present research.

Of the 154 girls in the ninth grade, 23 individuals were classified as isolates. Fourteen of the 23 formed the population for the present study. These 14 isolates met the two criteria of expressing a friendship choice while in the ninth grade and of remaining in the tenth grade class. (The other nine included two true isolates and five

self isolates who made no friendship choices and two girls who left school.) Of the 14, seven became members of their desired RFSs or reference groups by the tenth grade. For this study a reference group was defined as a reciprocal friendship structure into which an isolate made a choice which was unreciprocated. Obviously, these small numbers did not allow statistical testing and provided difficulties in allowing us to generalize from the results. However the category of "isolate" is not a category which we expect to contain large numbers of individuals in any high school population.

Four variables were investigated to determine factors differentiating isolates who became members from those who did not become members of their chosen RFSs by tenth grade. The four variables were chosen to identify characteristics of a reference group in addition to the clothing and appearance opinions of the members. Explanation of each of the four variables will follow, along with discussion of the corresponding findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Social acceptance scores of the RFS into which the isolates chose*

Stone's view of a social transaction (6), containing both appearance and discourse aspects, was used as a guide for deriving three social acceptance scores for each class member. Stone divides a social transaction into two parts:

Appearance, then, is that part of social transaction which establishes identifications of the participants. As such it may be distinguished from discourse, which we conceptualize as the text of the transaction—what the parties are discussing. Appearance and discourse are two distinct dimensions of the social transaction (6).

For this study, social acceptance in the school and particular RFSs was defined as the "social transaction," and the researcher aimed to determine the general importance which each RFS gave to appearance and/or discourse factors for social acceptance in the school or RFS. The three social acceptance scores included: 1) a school social acceptance score, involving factors important for general social acceptance in the school; 2) a group social acceptance score, involving factors which the interviewee felt were important for social acceptance in her group; and 3) a self-satisfaction score, involving opinions about oneself as related to factors for social acceptance in the school. Three corresponding scores were also derived for each RFS, which were the three median scores of the individual scores of members of each RFS. Examples of the content of the questions used in deriving the three social acceptance scores follow.

### *School social acceptance score:*

"If a new girl came to the school and wanted to get in with the girls, what would be the best way to do this?"

"Do you think clothing influences a girl's popularity at the school?"

### *Group social Acceptance score:*

"With the group you go around with, what are some things which are important to do in order to be popular?"

"How does the group you go around with compare in dress to other groups at school?"

### *Self-satisfaction score:*

"Are you usually satisfied with your general appearance?"

"Do you feel ill at ease at school because of your clothing?"

Prior to investigating possible relationships between an isolate's scores and those of her chosen RFS, it was necessary to determine whether differences existed among the RFS groups concerning the importance of appearance and discourse factors for social acceptance. Without RFS group differences as a base, examining the 14 isolates' scores in relation to their chosen RFSs would have had no purpose. The comparison of social acceptance scores of the various RFSs showed that the groups did differ, leading to the negation of across-the-board conformity of opinions in this school. Briefly, findings revealed:

### *School social acceptance scores:*

1. Just under half of the RFSs indicated that appearance and discourse factors were of equal importance for social acceptance in the school.
2. Another group of RFSs, again just under half, indicated that discourse factors were of more importance than appearance factors for social acceptance in the school.
3. Only one RFS indicated that appearance factors were of more importance than discourse factors for social acceptance in the school.

### *Group social acceptance scores:*

1. Slightly less than two-thirds of the RFSs indicated that appearance factors and discourse factors were of equal importance for social acceptance in their RFSs.

2. Slightly more than one-third of the RFSs indicated that discourse factors were more important than appearance factors for social acceptance in their RFSs.

*Self-satisfaction scores:*

1. All of the RFSs' self-satisfaction scores indicated that the members had more positive than negative self opinions. However, the RFSs differed in their degree of positive self opinions.

Examination of an isolate's scores, the scores of her chosen RFS, and her entrance into the RFS showed that the relationship between her school and group social acceptance scores and the scores of her chosen RFS could be used to distinguish isolates who became members of their chosen RFSs from those who did not. From Figures 1 and 2 it is seen that the majority of isolates with school and group social acceptance scores close to the scores of their chosen RFSs became members of the groups they chose. On the other hand, the majority of those isolates who had school and group social acceptance scores far from the scores of their chosen RFSs did not become members of those groups. Whether or not an isolate had a self-satisfaction score close to the self-satisfaction score of her chosen RFS was not a factor separating those isolates who became RFS members from isolates who did not. See Figure 3.

*Content patterns of opinions of the RFS into which the isolate chose*

Unlike social acceptance scores, which were measures of general opinion of individuals and among group members, content patterns of opinions for RFSs were regarded as measures of the actual content of opinions among RFS members. Three content patterns of opinions corresponding to the three social acceptance scores were developed for each RFS. In deriving the content patterns, the investigator used the content of the answers to those questions on which at least 50 percent of the RFS members agreed.

As with the social acceptance scores, it was necessary to determine whether the RFS groups differed in their content patterns of opinions.

Without RFS differences as a base, there would have been no purpose in examining the 14 isolates' scores in relation to their chosen RFSs. Results showed that the RFSs did differ in their content patterns of opinions. Findings are briefly summarized here:

*School social acceptance content pattern of opinions:*

The RFSs agreed that clothing influenced a girl's popularity but gave differing factors important for social acceptance in various

situations. The RFSs were not, however, always consistent in naming only appearance factors or discourse as important for social acceptance in the various situations.

*Group social acceptance content pattern of opinions:*

Although the majority of the RFSs agreed that only discourse factors are used in choosing a friend, they expressed uncertainty as to whether girls with irregularities in appearance would be accepted as a girlfriend or a member of their group.

*Self-satisfaction pattern of opinions:*

Although all RFSs had a majority of positive self opinions in their content patterns of opinions, they differed in the actual content of their self opinions.

From investigation between the relationship of an isolate's opinions to the content pattern of her chosen RFS and her entrance into the RFS, the following results emerged. As shown in Figures 4 and 5, whether an isolate had opinions in agreement with the school and group content patterns of opinions of her chosen RFS was not a variable separating those isolates who became group members from those who did not. The majority of all isolates had opinions in agreement with the school social acceptance content patterns of their chosen RFSs. However, the majority of isolates were not in agreement with the group social acceptance content patterns of their chosen RFSs. In contrast, as shown in Figure 6, agreement with the self-satisfaction pattern of a chosen RFS was a factor separating those isolates who became members of their chosen RFSs from those isolates who did not.

*Cohesion of the RFS into which the isolate chose*

The cohesion or integration among the members of a RFS was determined by dividing the number of friendship choices made within the RFS between its members by the number of possible in-group choices. The cohesion of the RFS into which the isolate chose was found to be a variable separating those isolates who became members from those who did not. The majority of isolates who chose into more cohesive RFSs became members of the RFSs into which they chose. None of the isolates who chose into less cohesive RFSs became members of their chosen groups.

*Diversity of opinions of the RFS into which the isolate chose*

The diversity of opinions among RFS members was derived by dividing the number of different answers given among the RFS

members to interview schedule questions by the number of different answers given by all class members. A high opinion diversity score indicated that the RFS members gave a wide range of different answers when answering interview schedule questions. A low opinion diversity score indicated that the group had a narrow range of opinions. The opinion diversity score gave no indication of the content of the opinions but was only an indication of the number of different answers given by a group's members. The diversity of opinions among members of the RFS into which the isolate chose was found to be a variable separating isolates who became members of their chosen RFSs from those isolates who did not. The majority of isolates who chose into RFSs with low opinion diversity scores, and thus narrower ranges of opinions, became members of the RFSs into which they chose. The majority of isolates who chose into RFSs with higher opinion diversity scores, and thus wider ranges of opinions, did not become members of the RFSs into which they chose.

#### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The findings supported Hypothesis I. Patterns of clothing and appearance opinions distinctive to peer friendship groups within the entire ninth grade class of girls differed from each other and from the overall class patterns of clothing and appearance opinions. Hypothesis II (isolates who are positively oriented to particular peer reference groups and have similar clothing and appearance opinions to those of the peer reference groups would become members of the peer friendship groups to which they aspire) could be accepted only in part. Hypothesis II could be accepted when "clothing and appearance opinions" were taken to mean school social acceptance and group social acceptance scores or self-satisfaction content pattern of opinions. Hypothesis II was not supported when "clothing and appearance opinions" were taken to mean self-satisfaction score of school social acceptance or group social acceptance content patterns.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, adolescents show a desire to belong and be a part of friendship groups. Not all adolescents, however, remain continually part of the same friendship group. Instead, there is movement from one friendship group to another and from non-membership status or isolation to group membership. When individuals desire to be part of a group, they are said to view the desired group as a reference group. As isolates strive for membership in their reference groups, they take on certain attitudes and opinions of the group prior to entrance into it.

When isolates had opinions concerning clothing, appearance, and social acceptance similar to those of their reference groups, they were more likely to become members of their reference groups than when they had unlike opinions. Thus, opinions about clothing and appearance seem to be important in the process of *movement* from social isolation to social acceptance.

The findings in this study suggest that the approximation by isolates of the *general opinions* of a chosen group about factors important in social acceptance is more important for gaining acceptance in the group than approximation of the *specific opinions* of the group. Perhaps this can be explained in that a group may be aware of whether they generally consider clothing and appearance important but less aware of their specific opinions about items of clothing *per se*. Thus the general approximation of opinions of a potential member to those of the desired group may be adequate for group membership providing other factors for membership are met.

At the same time, it was shown that the isolates did not necessarily become members of the less cohesive RFSs nor the RFSs with the widest ranges of opinions. A possible explanation may be that the more cohesive RFS or the RFS with a narrow range of opinions is more certain of its membership or opinions. Thus it may be easier for the group to recognize when a new individual desires membership and is desired by the group. At the same time it may be easier for a RFS with a narrow range of opinions to recognize when a potential group member has the same opinions and likewise for the potential member to recognize and approximate the opinions of the desired group.

This study also showed that there was not across-the-board conformity in adolescents' opinions. Although there was much agreement among class members on a few opinions, each individual friendship group had its own opinion pattern peculiar to itself.

The findings of this study may have special pertinence for individuals who are interested in the variables of adolescent social acceptance. This investigation indicates that certain aspects of clothing and appearance opinions are related to reference group entrance and that not all reference-friendship groups do have similar opinions. The data further substantiate the idea that *movement* from social isolation to social acceptance is aided not so much by approximation of one's opinions to those of *overall class norms* but to *specific norms* of the group into which one desires entrance.

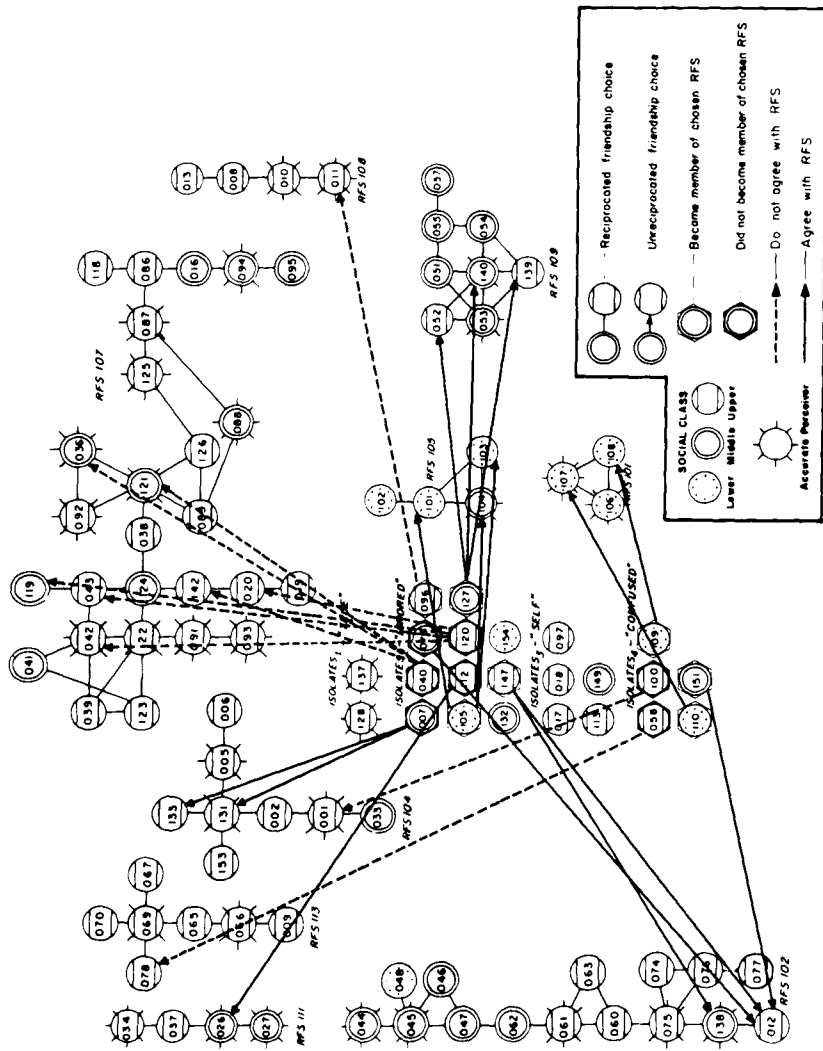


Figure 1. RFS Entrances by Isolates and General Social Acceptance Score of Chosen RFS.

\*The research reported in Figures 1-6 does not involve social class analysis. However, social class positions of the family are indicated on the accompanying sociograms as social class was included in the remaining research analysis.

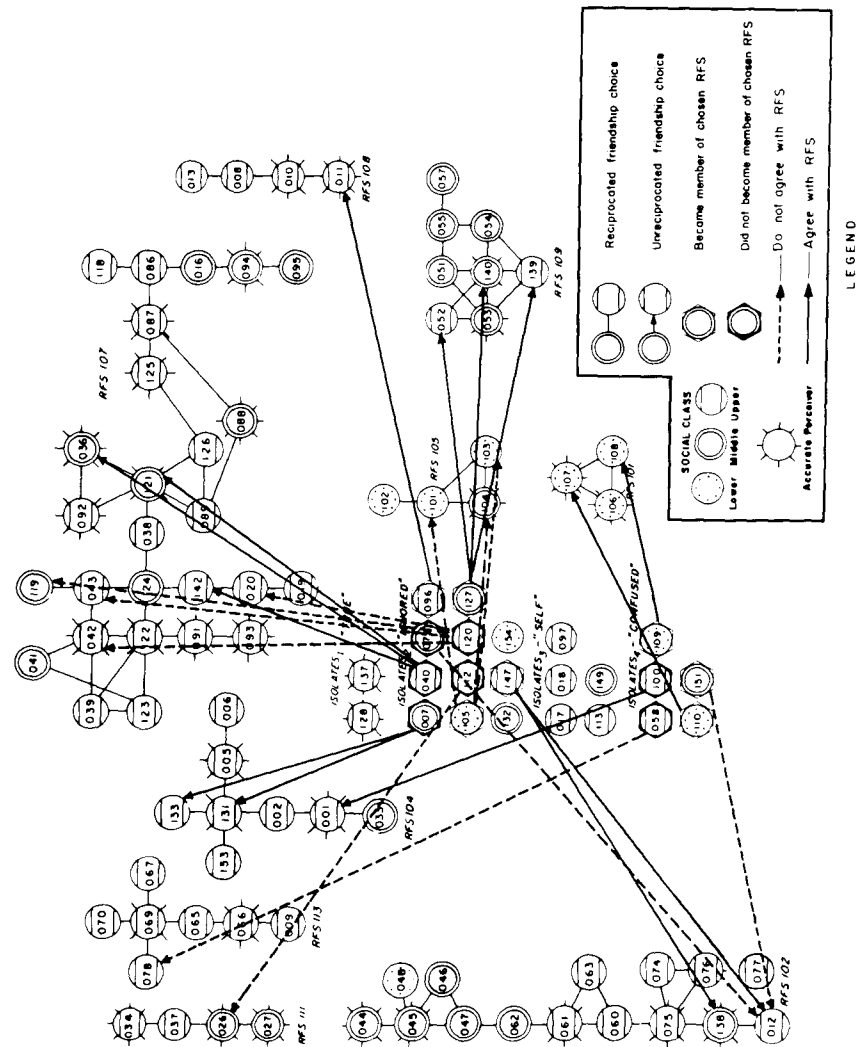


Figure 2. RFS Entrances by Isolates and Group Social Acceptance Score of Chosen RFS.

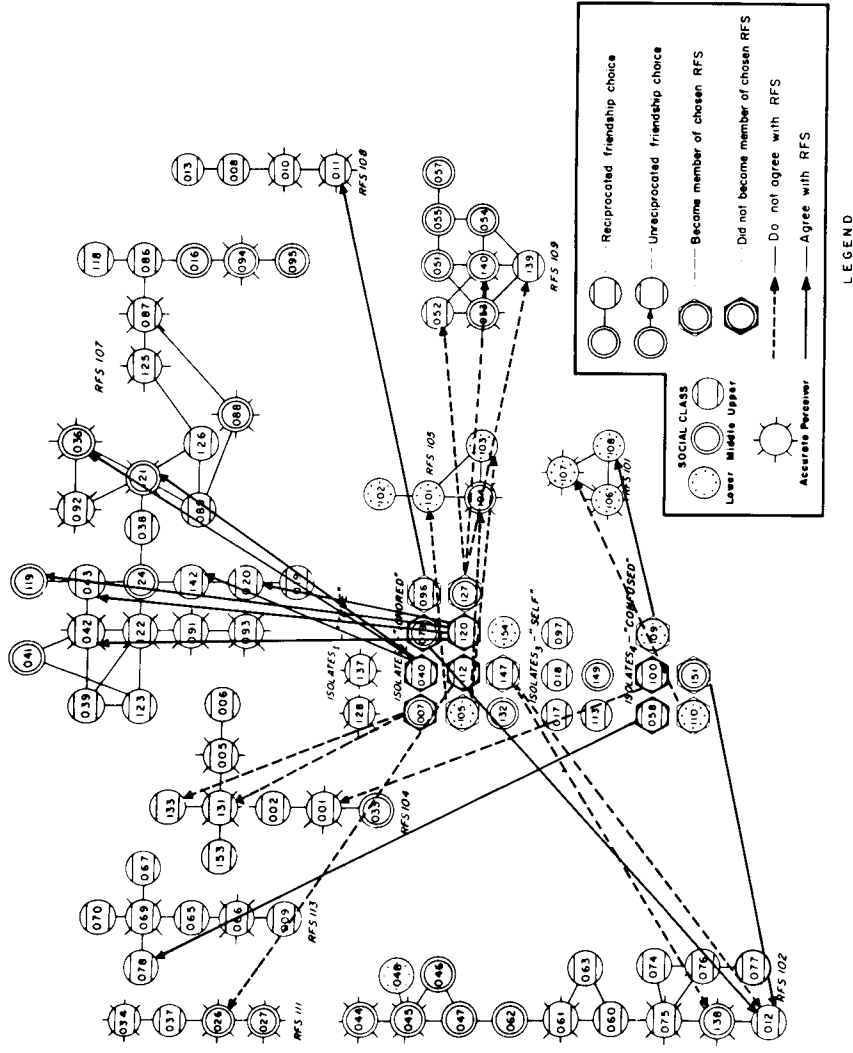


Figure 3. RFS Entrance by Isolates and Self-Satisfaction Score of Chosen RFS.

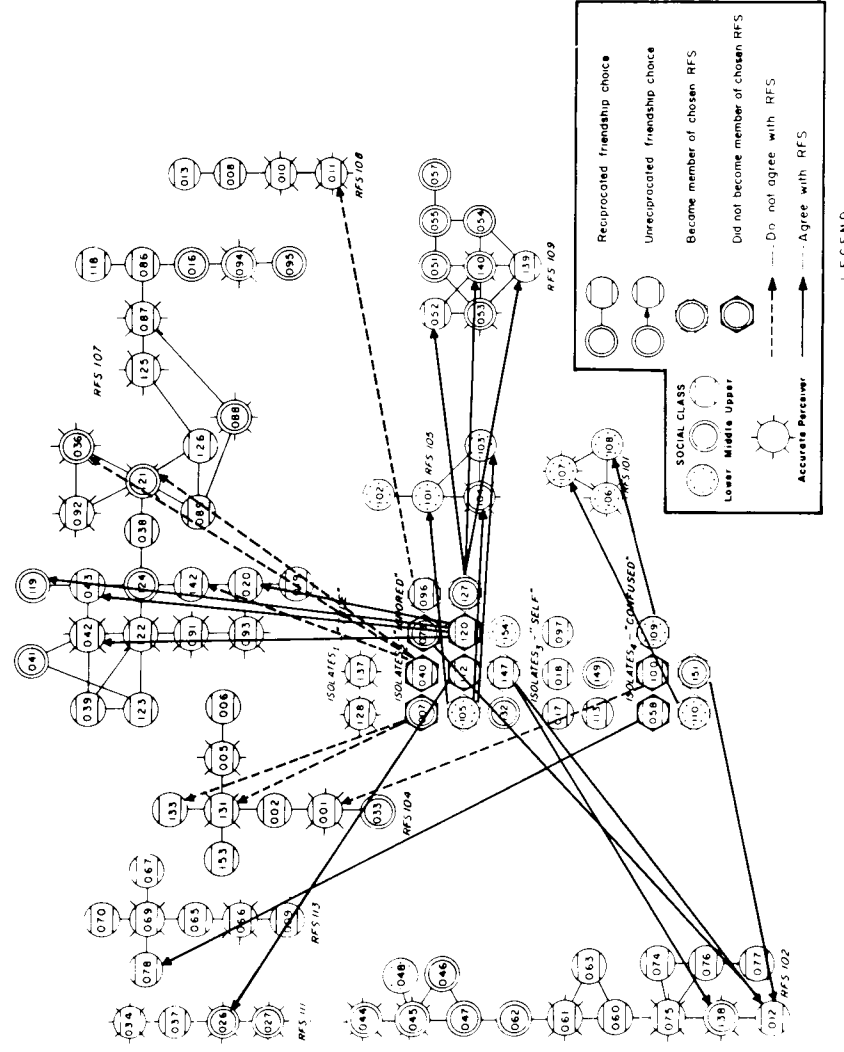


Figure 4. RFS Entrance by Isolates and General Social Acceptance Pattern of Opinions of Chosen RFS.

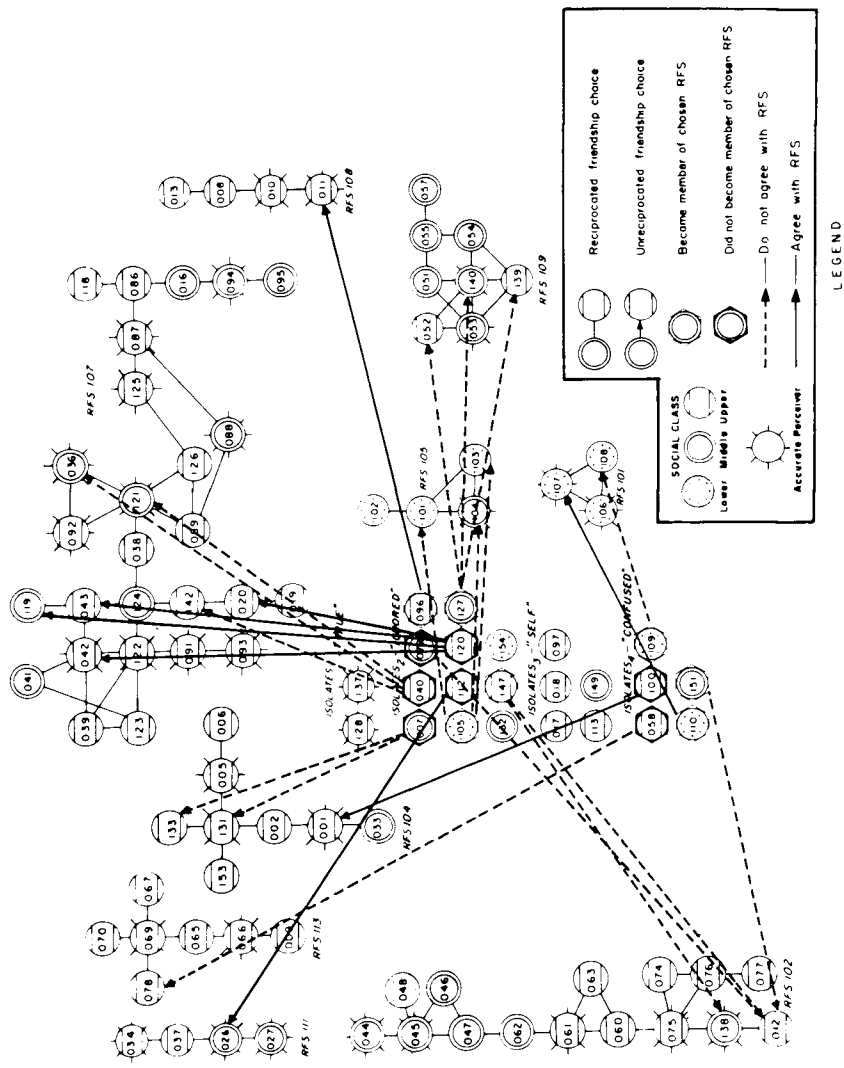


Figure 5. RFS Entrance by Isolates and Group Social Acceptance Pattern of Opinions of Chosen RFS.

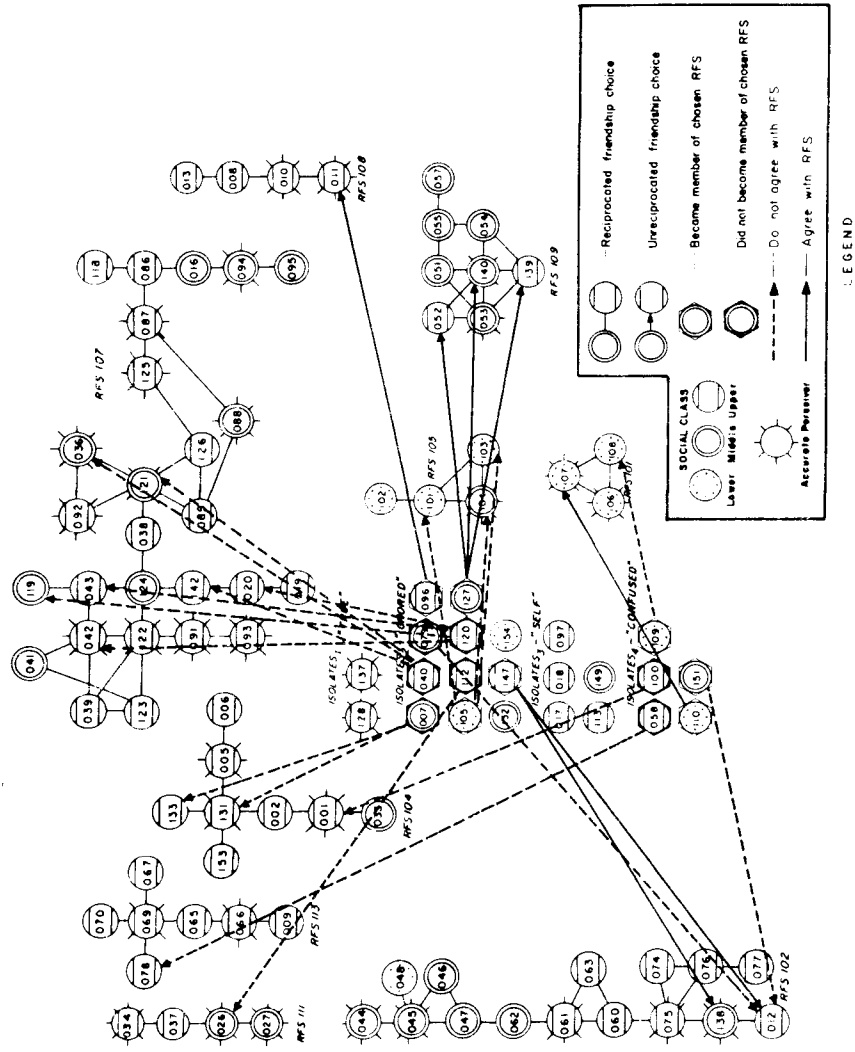


Figure 6. RFS Entrance by Isolates and Self-Satisfaction Pattern of Opinions of Chosen RFS.



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A CASE OF EXHIBITIONISM  
TREATED BY COUNTER-CONDITIONING

L. F. Lowenstein, Ph.D.

The fact that fantasy plays a significant role in both creating and perpetuating sexual deviations has received attention in recent publications (Evans, 1968, Davison 1968, McGuire, Carlisle and Young 1965 and Lazarus 1968). The successful treatment of a case of voyeurism through counter-conditioning (Jackson, 1968) also indicates that the orgasm can be used in conjunction with initially neglected fantasies in order to reinforce acceptable sexual behavior. There is also some evidence to suggest that sexual deviations depending heavily on deviant sexual fantasy are more difficult to inhibit or eliminate than deviant behavior based on normal or acceptable fantasies.

Not everyone accepts the views of Fenichel (1945) that the exhibitionist uses his behavior as a denial of castration or as reassurance against castration. A behaviorist learning theory type of explanation views treatment as a process of counter-conditioning. It is therefore basically concerned with the maladaptive symptoms and not the basic etiology.

*Case History*

The subject was a 17-year-old unmarried male, whose impending court appearance led him to be referred by the probation officer. As in most cases of this type, the subject was very reluctant to talk about sexual matters, but gradually developed a relationship with the psychologist and spoke more freely about his exhibitionism. The youth was able to trace this behavior back to age 10. He said he was unable to control himself whenever he came toward a wooded area and noticed young girls playing. He would feel, at such times, an almost obsessional need to expose himself and this was followed by an extreme feeling of anxiety and guilt. The exhibitionism occurred several times a week and the preferred objects were girls aged 12-15.

He rarely masturbated and, in fact, frowned on such "dirty" behavior. The object of exposing his sexual organs, he said, was 1) to observe a look of surprise and 2) to see whether there was a desire among those present for him to do it again.