Teen-Agers' Appearance and Social Acceptance[1]

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PUBLIC OPINION reflects the notion that today's adolescents' conspicuous preoccupation with clothing and appearance is evidence of superficial values. However, several well-known sociologists and social psychologists think otherwise.

Goffman emphasizes the importance of clothing and appearance in expression of the self by "managing" one's "impression" on others (*1*). Stone also emphasizes the importance of appearance in social interaction, for "appearance means identifications of one another" (*2*). Wax contends that, in their continual involvement with fashion and grooming, adolescent girls are experimenting with a yet undeveloped self image with which they can be comfortable (*3*). Hurlock points out that during the teen-age years in the United States youth develops a new awareness of the self which is accompanied by an emphasis on strong peer group ties (*4*), and Hurlock and Gordon indicate that similarity of clothing helps the adolescent identify with his group because of the high visibility factor of apparel over other elements (*5, 6*).

Researchers of adolescent culture agree that the influence of peer groups is strong. Within the peer group there is the tendency for group conformity, even though individuality may exist within the narrow limits of the group norms. The clique is typical of the peer group where youths join together in a common effort to learn acceptable group norms and values in order to establish an identity. (*7*)

Sociometric and near-sociometric methods of inquiring into populations have successfully yielded information on the evolution and organization of groups and the relative position of individuals within them. The cohesiveness of groups is determined by the attraction that a group has for its members to stay in the group. Few systematic studies have explored the factors involved in increasing or decreasing group cohesion (*8*). Little information is available on the possible influence of clothing and appearance as elements of group cohesion. Common opinions on clothing and appearance may represent a single element in the total matrix of elements which produce cohesion in any group. The research reported here directs itself to this problem.

Although this was an exploratory study, the following working hypothesis was developed to guide the research: Members of a group have similar opinions regarding clothing, appearance, and group acceptance which contribute to the group's cohesion. These opinions are different from those of non-group members or members of other groups.

POPULATION STUDIED

The population studied was the class of 154 ninth grade girls in the only high school in a community with a population of 30,000 in a midwestern state. Proximity to a university made the location atypical in such respects as level of income, education, age, mobility, and occupation of the respondents' parents, for white-collar workers predominated.

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However, two years prior to the study the high school had incorporated into its district a small area of low-income working-class families. Thus, socio-economic extremes existed in the school population, providing another factor for investigation of elements in group cohesion.

METHODS USED IN DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire and an interview which included a rating of personal appearance by an interviewer were the sources of data. The instruments were administered at the school by three women interviewers who had been trained for the project. Questions pertinent to this study were selected from these instruments.

From the questionnaire the items chosen for this study pertained to personal information about the respondent, her family background, and her friendship choices. A near-sociometric question was included as the basis for determining the social acceptance category of each girl whose friendship choices were reciprocated or not reciprocated. The girls were asked to write the names of their two "best girl friends" in the ninth grade of their high school with whom they shared secrets. Additional spaces were given if they wanted to list more than two names.

From the open-ended interview schedule, items were chosen that pertained to appraisal of others as well as one's self and one's group. The first questions made no reference to clothing or appearance but allowed spontaneous replies about factors involved in popularity and acceptance.

THE SOCIOGRAM

Each girl was given a code number, and her best-friend choices were recorded on a matrix chart. From the matrix chart, a sociogram was constructed to show only the reciprocated friendships of each ninth grade girl. Three major categories of social acceptance based on unreciprocated or reciprocated friendships were established: isolates, mutual pair members, and members of reciprocal friendship structures (RFS). The definitions of these categories are:

Isolate: An individual who had no reciprocated friendships. There are four types of isolates:

- Isolate$_1$: pure isolate, whose lack of choices received match the lack of choices made
- Isolate$_2$: ignored isolate, makes choices but receives none
- Isolate$_3$: self isolate, makes no choices but receives some
- Isolate$_4$: confused isolate, the choices made and received do not match

Mutual pair: A reciprocated choice of two members; hence, a dyad

Reciprocal friendship structure: A sociometric diagram of individuals whose choices of friends were returned

The term reciprocal friendship structure was used instead of clique. Clique is used to refer to a group, usually of three or more persons built around a nucleus of individuals whom they chose (9). The term reciprocal friendship structure includes all arrangements of reciprocal choices and not only those with a nucleus. It is, therefore, a more comprehensive category than clique and better suited to the purpose of measuring social acceptance in this study.

The sociogram (see page 459) graphically describes the relative position of each of the 154 ninth grade girls with respect to her reciprocated friendship choices or lack of them. There were 23 isolates, 18 members of a mutual pair, and 113 members in 17 reciprocal friendship structures which ranged in size from 3 to 27. Each RFS was assigned a number for identification purposes. The average size of a structure was five girls.

Each circle in the sociogram represents an individual whose code number appears in the center. The lines which connect circles indicate reciprocated choices. Also indicated in each circle is the girl's social class rank as it was determined by her family's rating according to Warner's Index of Status Characteristics. (10) [7]

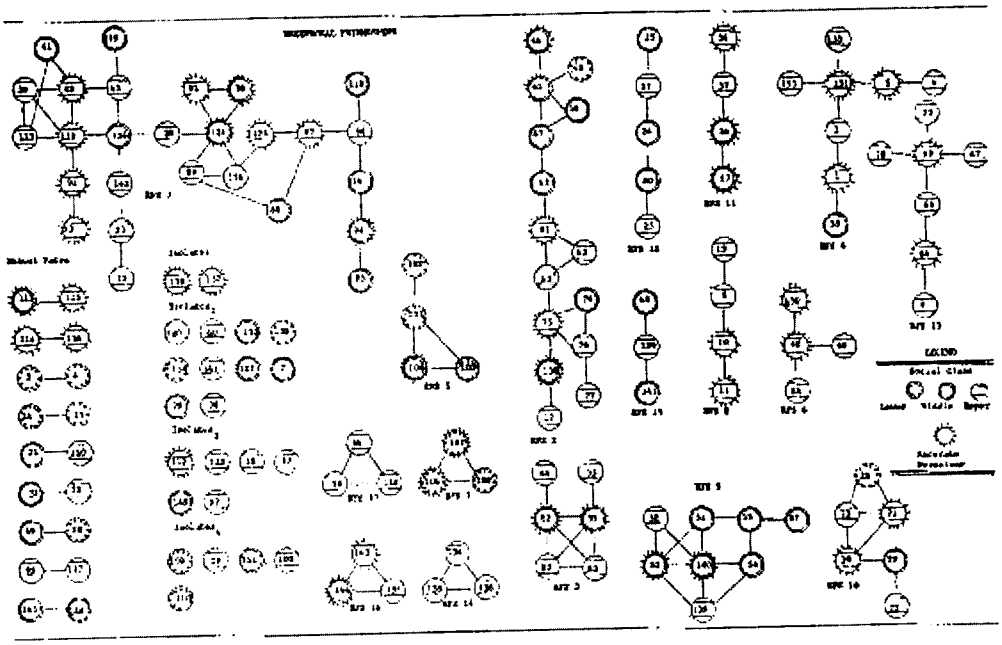
DATA ANALYSIS

In order to test the hypothesis, the categories of isolate, mutual pair, and RFS were cross-tabulated with various background factors and with opinions about appearance, clothing, and social acceptance.

Background factors. The three categories were first tabulated with such variables as social-class, mother's occupation, father's education, number of siblings, religious preference, location of elementary school attended, grade-point average and honor roll status, school club membership, and an appearance rating [8] to see if differences existed among the girls in the three categories of social acceptance. In summary, the most important differences were these:

[7] The legend for the sociometric chart also refers to an Accurate Perceiver—an individual who had all choices reciprocated, or who neither chose nor was chosen—a category not utilized in the research reported here.

[8] Appearance rating was a composite assessment of hair, complexion, figure, and clothing, and included qualities of neatness, cleanliness, and appropriateness of dress for school.



Proportionately more isolates and mutual pair members were from the lower social-class than from the middle or upper. Two small RFS groupings, 1 and 5, were distinctly lower-social-class groups; and six of them, RFS 4, 6, 8, 13, 14, and 17, were predominantly upper class. Only RFS 2 and 10 had a mixture of all three classes (and in each case, only one lower-social-class member) while the remaining seven groupings, RFS 3, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15, and 17, were mixtures of the middle and upper classes.

The majority of the girls had attended public elementary schools in the community, but more isolates and mutual pair members than girls in RFS's had attended schools outside of the community, suggesting a possible reason for their not being in an RFS.

The interviewers rated proportionately more girls from the mutual pair and isolate categories as below average in appearance, while in the RFS category the highest proportion of girls was rated as average. The girls of RFS 1, 5, and 17 were rated as below average.

Opinions on appearance. Items that pertained to two categories of appraisal, "review" and "program," from Stone's theoretical statement regarding appearance and the self were also utilized in data analysis. According to Stone, review responses are comments "made about the wearer of clothes by others, and program responses are those comments made about the wearer by the wearer." (*11*)

Clothing of others. Analysis of the data in terms of review revealed that when all the girls responded to an open-ended question on general acceptance, clothing was considered the attribute first in importance in describing the characteristics of the most popular girl. In describing how to "get in" with the popular girls and the characteristics on which a new girl would be judged, the respondents mentioned clothing as second and looks as third in importance, while personality rated first.

RFS members, isolates, and mutual pair members generally did not agree on the responses. Analysis of all replies according to reciprocal friendship category showed that the individual RFS's had greater consensus than did the other two categories.

Generally, a greater proportion of isolates than mutual pair or RFS members included clothing and appearance replies. The isolates mentioned and concurred more frequently on the influence of clothing on popularity. Isolates also mentioned in greater proportion that there were girls who were "not dressed right" than did mutual pair or RFS members.

Proportionately more isolates referred to their group as being "average" when compared to the dress of other groups, whereas proportionately more mutual pair members considered their group "better dressed" than did the other categories of reciprocal friendship.

Isolates had stronger feelings concerning the influence of clothing on popularity, for proportionately more of them thought it was important than

did the mutual pair or RFS members. Conversely, more RFS members than the others thought clothing was *not* influential in popularity.

The majority of the population, 75 per cent, agreed that there were girls who were not dressed right; but, as previously mentioned, isolates seemed most aware of these girls. The girls who were not dressed right were described as being from poor families, and their clothing was most frequently described as not "in fashion."

The specific RFS's were analyzed separately to determine the amount of agreement of the members' opinions in answer to the questions. Two-thirds, or 67 per cent, agreement was selected as indicative of group cohesion since the RFS's ranged in size from 3 to 27. Although 100 per cent agreement might be more indicative of cohesion in the smaller structures, this is unrealistic for the larger ones.

The RFS members exhibited a relatively high amount of cohesion in their opinions on the following:

1. Personality, clothes, looks, and the "way she acts" were the main characteristics used in judging a new girl in school.
2. The clothing of the popular girls differs from the clothing of the other girls.
3. Clothing influences a girl's popularity in this high school.
4. The clothing of their group was considered to be "average" when compared to that of other groups.
5. Generally, those who admitted that there were girls in the ninth grade who did "not dress right" denied having these girls as friends.

In reviewing dress and appearance of other girls, there was more agreement among RFS members than among isolates or mutual pair members. The isolates, however, reflected stronger feelings concerning these attributes than did the other reciprocal friendship categories. These findings lend support to the working hypothesis that members of the same group have similar opinions concerning the review of others' clothing, appearance, and group acceptance which do contribute to the group's cohesion and differ from those held by non-group members or members of other groups.

Clothing of self and friends. "Program" refers to appraisal of one's self or group. The girls emphasized that "proper action to others" was considered most important in their own group for being popular. "Nice clothes" ranked sixth in importance. When reviewing characteristics important to *other* groups, the girls had ranked clothing first; but when talking about their *own* specific group, they downplayed its contribution to popularity.

When asked "whose approval of your clothing means the most to you," the RFS members mentioned themselves and their girl friends more often, whereas proportionately more isolates and mutual pair members mentioned their parents. Thus, parent orientation was exhibited by isolates and mutual pair members, and peer orientation by the RFS members. This same pattern of orientation emerged when responses were analyzed to the question, "Does your mother make suggestions about the clothes you wear to school?" Here, the parent orientation of the isolates and mutual pair members was strong, whereas more RFS members said their mothers did not make suggestions.

Two-thirds of all girls wanted to change something about themselves. The item named most frequently was their figure. However, the majority of all girls did not think they could make friends easier or make a different impression on others if they made these changes.

All categories of reciprocal friendship reported a dissatisfaction with their general appearance. Hair was mentioned most often as an item they would like to change.

Self-confidence was reported by all girls to be gained from some clothes more than others, and the major reason they said these clothes made a difference was that they felt comfortable in them. Most girls also stated that they seldom felt ill at ease because of their clothing, that they sometimes received compliments on the way they looked at school, and that they never felt embarrassed about their school clothes. In general, however, the isolates and mutual pair members expressed the opinion that clothing and appearance had a greater effect upon their relationship with others than did the RFS members as a whole.

The same indicator of cohesion for members of a group (67 per cent agreement) was used in analyzing program responses. RFS members exhibited a relatively high amount of cohesion in their opinions on the following:

1. They were "average" in dress when compared to other girls.
2. The girls wanted to change something about themselves.
3. Some clothes gave them more confidence than others.
4. They had not come to school dressed differently from the other girls.
5. They were not usually satisfied with their general appearance, especially their hair and complexion.
6. They "sometimes" received compliments on their clothes.
7. They "never" felt embarrassed about their school clothes.

The findings indicated that members of an RFS had greater consensus of opinion than did isolates or

mutual pair members in answering questions about "program." Again the working hypothesis was supported.

Popularity and clothing. Stone theorized "when program and review coincide, then the self of the one who appears . . . is validated or established; when such responses tend toward disparity, the self of the one who appears is challenged, and conduct may be expected to move in the direction of some redefinition of the challenged self." (*12*)

This idea was tested by analyzing the responses to questions asking the girls to name those in their grade whom they considered "most popular," "best dressed," and "not dressed right."

Isolates, mutual pair members, and RFS members were in general agreement that the largest number of most popular as well as best-dressed girls were in RFS 7. They were reluctant to name those not dressed right. However, of those named as such, 31 per cent were members of a mutual pair; 16 per cent were isolates; while 23 per cent were in RFS 1 and 14 per cent were in RFS 5, the two lower-class groups.

Program and review coincided for members of RFS 7 who were considered by others as most popular and best dressed, and who evaluated themselves similarly, while in the appraisal of those who were not dressed right, program and review coincided for five isolates and six mutual pair members.

IMPLICATIONS

To adults, clothing and appearance may seem unimportant or, as emphasized by teen-agers, indicative of superficial and shallow values. However, if peer acceptance is important to an individual, dress and grooming can loom as crucial variables in the process of making friends and keeping them. The challenge to home economists, educators, and social scientists working with American teen-agers is neither to overemphasize nor underestimate the importance of the physical self and its appearance but to understand its possible influence in adolescent life.

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Questionnaire Sent by Council

The question of the date before which institutions should not send a letter offering incoming graduate students scholarships, fellowships, or traineeships is under discussion by the Council of Graduate Schools (see page 102 of the February 1966 Journal) and the Association of Graduate Schools. The Council has sent a questionnaire to member institutions asking if they would prefer March 1 or March 21 as the date before which they should not offer graduate student awards, or if they would prefer not to designate a date because it would restrict the recruiting of awardees. Another key statement requiring the opinion of each institution is: "We adhere to and will continue to adhere to the Resolution which permits a student to resign from an award up to April 15."

When the results of the questionnaire have been compiled, the Council will circulate them to all member institutions in the Council.