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A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF POPULARITY, GROUP MEMBERSHIP, AND DRESS¹

ELEANOR A. KELLEY AND JOANNE B. EICHER

Although sociometric studies are plentiful, the sociometric research reported in this paper is unusual in that one high school class was studied for four consecutive years. This report includes the four-year findings of a longitudinal study of the influence of clothing on social acceptance. Two articles previously published in the *JOURNAL* and referred to in this paper reported findings on the ninth- and twelfth-grades separately.

If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word. The constraint is nonetheless efficacious for being indirect (1).

ARE Durkheim's observations, written in 1885, applicable today? Research findings at Michigan State University lend current support to his statement. A class of high school girls were asked when they were freshmen and again as seniors to name the "best dressed," "most popular," and "not dressed right" girls in their grade. This information was examined in relation to their group membership and social class positions. While previous articles reported findings on the ninth (2) and twelfth grades (3) separately, this report presents a comparative picture of the girls' freshman- and senior-year answers to the popularity and dress questions. Their answers also were related to the social class and group membership information which evolved over the four-year study.

METHOD OF PROCEDURE

The opinions and attitudes of high school girls concerning dress, social acceptance, and related

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factors were studied longitudinally. Two years prior to this study, the predominantly upper-middle-class midwestern suburb, a university town, incorporated a lower social class area of the community through school district annexation. Because the school contained different social classes, it provided an opportunity to study whether or not individuals representing social extremes interact in peer-group structures.

Each girl was assigned three identifying positions. The first represented her social-class standing. Warner's Index of Status Characteristics was used to denote social class (4). From the data, three categories of social class evolved: high, middle, and low.

Each girl was assigned a second position that related to social acceptance, based on mutual choice among the group members. Specifically, the choice was based on the desire to engage in

Dr. Kelley is an associate professor of textiles and clothing at Louisiana State University. Material in this article is drawn from her PhD thesis, "Peer Group Friendships in One Class of High School Girls: Change and Stability." The thesis was completed in the sociology department of Michigan State University in 1988 under the direction of Dr. Eicher, associate professor in the department of textiles, clothing and related arts.

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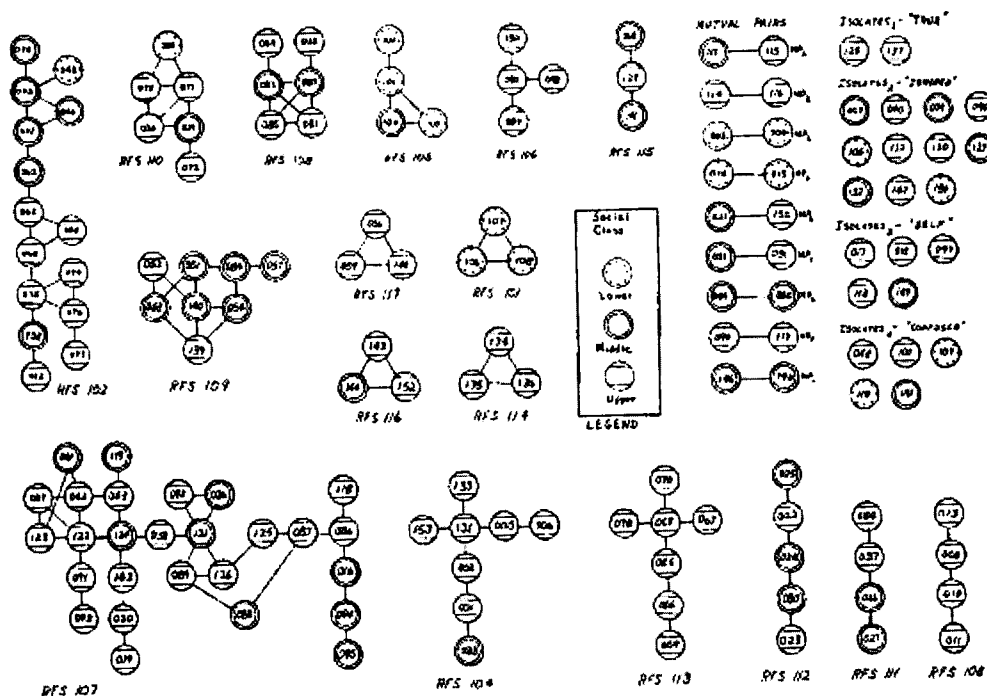


FIGURE 1. Reciprocal friendships of the ninth-grade girls in one high school class which became the senior class of 1965

interpersonal relationships stemming from an awareness of shared norms and behavior. From the operational definition—reciprocated friendship between two or more girls—two categories evolved. Figures 1 and 2 show each girl as either an isolate (an individual who had no reciprocated friendships*) or as part of a Reciprocated Friendship Structure (RFS). An RFS is a sociometric structure of individuals whose choice or choices of friends were returned. Special consideration was given to one type of RFS, the mutual pair which is an exclusive two-person reciprocated dyad.

The third position was also a social acceptance position. The girls were asked which of their classmates they perceived as "most popular," "best

dressed," and "not dressed right." These popularity and dress choice statuses for each girl who was mentioned are recorded beside her circle in the sociograms in figures 1 and 2. This facilitated a comparison of popularity and dress choice status with friendship position.


All of the social class and social acceptance data were collected through questionnaires (administered each year to the same subjects) and depth interviews (administered only in ninth and twelfth grades). All information was processed each year by the same team according to the methods developed in the initial project phase. A more detailed methodology description was presented previously (2,3).

POPULARITY, GROUP MEMBERSHIP, AND DRESS

Longitudinal analysis of the data revealed that

* The four isolate types which are shown on the sociogram are not utilized in the research reported here. They are defined, however, as follows:

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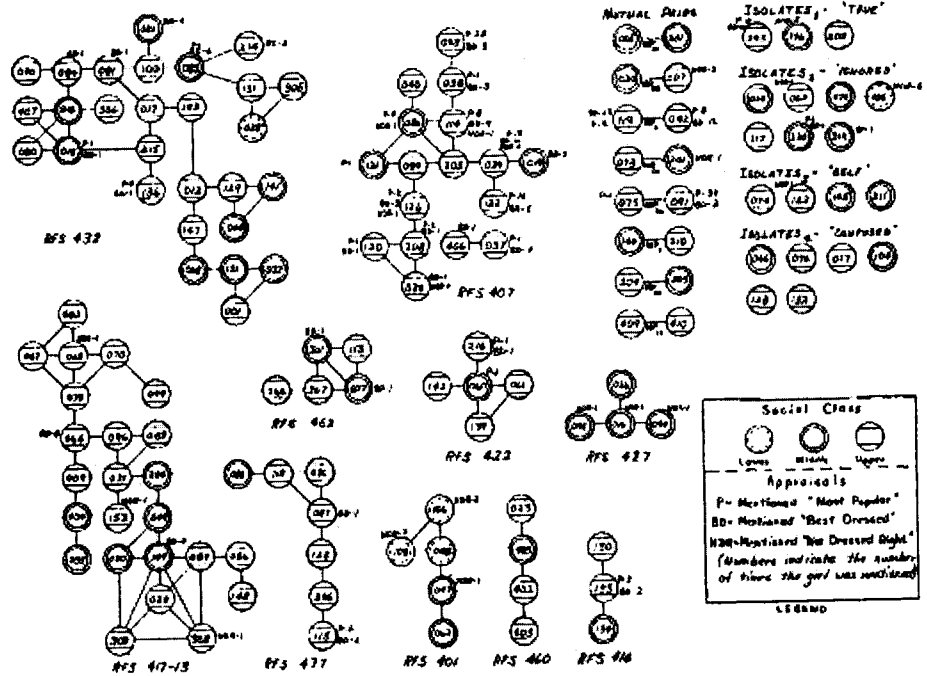


FIGURE 2. Reciprocal friendships and appraisal of popularity and dress of the twelfth-grade girls in one high school senior class of 1985

ships along distinct town and university lines emerged.

The first complex, the RFS 7 complex, emerged as the "social elite," based upon popularity and dress choices. Figure 3 shows the splits and re-combinations of this complex over the four years.³ A closed group with few out-group choices, these girls also had very few unreciprocated choices made into their complex by others.

The majority of girls in the RFS 7 complex were daughters of stable resident professionals—that is, doctors, lawyers, and business owners—and lived in affluent areas of town. Members of this complex ranked higher in social class than any other RFS complex. They were not the highest academic achievers, but they were most often named "most popular" and "best dressed" as ninth-graders

(see figure 1) and again as twelfth-graders (see figure 2). In the twelfth grade, three RFS's (407, 427, and 477) comprised the RFS 7 complex originating from the ninth-grade RFS 107. As shown in figure 2, RFS 407 received the majority of "most popular" and "best dressed" choices. RFS 477 received a few, while RFS 427 received none but did receive a few "not dressed right" choices. A few "not dressed right" choices also were directed to RFS 407 members. From responses during the interviews, these choices seemed based on a poor taste evaluation (poor usage of current in-season fashions) rather than really poor dress (out-of-season and out-of-fashion dress).

One twelfth-grade mutual pair also received "best dressed" and "most popular" choices (see MP, in figure 2). In the ninth grade, both girls were RFS 107 members. While they made no choices into the senior year RFS 7 complex, they continued to be chosen by the RFS 7 complex.

³ Note that all RFS numbers in this complex end in 7.

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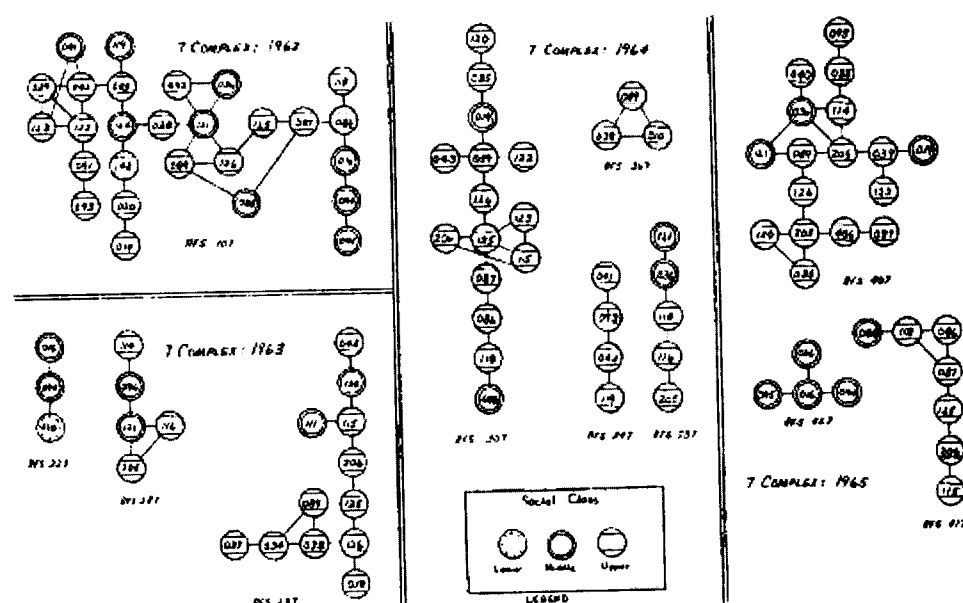


FIGURE 3. Four-year summary of the evolving splits and recombinations as the RFS 7 complex developed among the girls in one high school class which became the senior class of 1965

fathers were blue collar workers and lived in less affluent areas of town, the complex was a polarity to the "social elite" RFS 7. The girls in this group were often named as "not dressed right" in the ninth grade (see RFS 101 and 105, figure 1) and in the twelfth grade (see RFS 401, figure 2). For these girls, "not dressed right" seemed to mean poor dress according to class standards. For example, one girl was mentioned as wearing summer skirts in the wintertime.

Most girls in the RFS 1 and 5 complex were low academic achievers. Five out of the eight known "true" school dropouts⁴ in the study were found in this group. RFS 105 did not exist in the twelfth grade and only a portion of RFS 101 continued as RFS 401. Only four of the initial 17 lower social class girls remained in the twelfth grade.

The third and fourth complexes were the RFS 2 complex and the RFS 17-13 complex. By the twelfth grade, the RFS 2 complex incorporated several small ninth-grade RFS's. The RFS 17-13 complex combined two ninth-grade RFS's (RFS

117 and 113) as the group evolved toward the senior year. The RFS 2 and RFS 17-13 complexes contained some town girls; they also contained the majority of the girls whose parents were university affiliated. Both of these complexes were open, with interaction between them and the mutual pairs and isolates. The RFS 2 complex was similar to RFS 17-13, but RFS 2 seemed to enjoy a little more prestige. The girls in the RFS 2 complex received a few more popularity and dress choices than did those in RFS 17-13, they ranked higher in overall social class rankings, and they were a little higher in overall academic achievement. One of the RFS's in the RFS 2 complex emerged in the twelfth grade as the "intellectual elite." All five members had four-year "A" averages; four were daughters of university-affiliated personnel.

POPULARITY, DRESS, AND ISOLATION

The RFS's present a picture of group member-

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Some isolates were named as "best dressed," "most popular," and "not dressed right" in the ninth and twelfth grades. The two ninth-grade isolates who received "not dressed right" choices were lower social class girls. The only twelfth-grade lower social class isolate also received "not dressed right" choices. These three girls either chose into, or at some time during the study were members of the lower social class RFS 1 and 5 complex which received many "not dressed right" choices. Thus, it seems that the girls realistically appraised the RFS's into which they might be accepted.

Several middle social class isolates also received "not dressed right" choices in the twelfth grade. But in most cases the respondent's reason for naming the girl indicated poor taste rather than poor dress, as was the case for the lower social class isolates who received "not dressed right" choices.

All isolates named as "best dressed" and "most popular" were middle and upper social class respondents. Most ninth-grade isolates moved into RFS groups by their senior year. Isolate number 120 moved into RFS 407, the RFS which received most of the twelfth-grade popularity and dress choices. Ninth-grade isolate 113 moved into RFS 432, which was almost ignored in popularity and dress choices.

Two twelfth-grade isolates who received "best dressed" and "most popular" choices were respondents added in the sophomore year (number 220) and the junior year (number 313), but were isolates both of those years too. Twelfth-grade isolate number 043, however, presents a very different picture. Notice on figure 2 that in the twelfth grade she received eight "most popular" and fifteen "best dressed" choices; yet she was neither chosen nor did she make friendship choices. When interviewed, she assessed her senior year position by saying, "I have many friends, but none I would call best friends." As shown in figure 1, she was an integral member of the ninth-grade RFS 107, received popularity and dress choices along with the other RFS members, and evidently

continued to be perceived by the larger population as possessing characteristics similar to her ninth-grade friends.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been written about the importance that teenagers place on peer acceptance. Clothing and appearance often are mentioned as an important aspect of teenage culture, especially to teenage girls. The findings reported in this paper show that clothing and appearance are insufficient *alone* for group acceptance or exclusion. The well-dressed isolate may be an isolate by self-choice; however, the poorly dressed isolate may be the result of group exclusion rather than self-choice. Moreover, dress may influence acceptance into a particular group. Some groups are perceived by their peers as well-dressed and popular. Others are perceived as poorly dressed and are virtually ignored in overall popularity evaluation.

Durkheim's statement regarding dress, social class, and isolation is supported by this study. *But* the isolation was either small group isolation or individual isolation. Both types of isolation coincided with lower social class ranking in the predominantly upper-middle-class school. Perhaps in a different social class "mix" the relationship of poor dress and isolation would be different; but appearance probably is one important factor which teenagers consider in friendship choices, regardless of the social class "mix."

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