Behavior and Background of Students in College and Secondary School

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HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK AND LONDON

1937

BEHAVIOR AND BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS
IN COLLEGE AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

Printed in the United States of America
FIRST EDITION
I–M

Theoretical discussions of high-school and college students have far outweighed the facts about them. This is true, to an even greater degree, of the group of adolescents not in schools and college from whom, therefore, it is so difficult to get data. Facts are available in scattered sources in the fields of education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, physiology and biology. In order that teachers and specialists in personnel work may acquire a realistic, synthetic knowledge of youth, a summary of the results of investigations in these several fields is necessary. Data scattered "in the brains and in the books of specialists" are useless; they must be brought together in an easily available form as a unified whole.

In other fields summaries of investigations have been made available from time to time. Murchison's handbooks of child psychology bring together the results of a vast amount of research summarized by leading child psychologists. *The Psychological Bulletin* performs a similar service for general psychology and the *Review of Educational Research* keeps educators informed about the results of investigations in important areas of education. From Francis Bacon to Alexis Carrel, attempts have been made to organize knowledge "for the benefit and use of life." To reduce a chaotic mass of miscellaneous facts and opinions to an ordered and useful form is a task that in all ages has occupied the co-ordinating type of mind. It requires background and experience in the field and the ability to bring order out of a chaotic mass of unrelated details.

If the thousands of investigations relating to the broad field of personnel work are worthless, time and money ought never to have been expended on them. If, on the other hand, the results of these investigations make a real contribution to the body of professional subject matter in this field, they should be in the minds of those who are actively trying to individualize education.

At present, personnel researches are hidden away in technical journals, bulletins and books not easily accessible to those who are doing personnel work in high schools and colleges. Unless the personnel worker is in some large educational center or unless he spends a considerable portion of his income on professional books and magazines, he is not likely to find an adequate collection of articles of this kind near at hand.

Even if he could obtain these articles from a library, it is doubtful whether he would have time to read them and to cull from many pages the suggestions of most practical value to him. The service side of his work is so exacting and time-consuming that he has little time left for library study.

Accordingly, it is desirable that someone do this library work for the personnel worker, and present to him a bibliography from which he can select the articles most closely related to his immediate problems, as well as a summary of important findings regarding each area of advisory work. This service has been partially rendered in the first volume of a five-book series of summaries of personnel work. Volume One[2] is a summary of investigations relating to the administrative aspects of the work; the preparation, qualifications and functions of specialists; and the admission, orientation and educational guidance of students.

The present volume is the second in the series and, in some ways, the most valuable. It deals with the behavior and background of students. Its aim is to bring together some of the results of investigations relating to adolescent problems, physical characteristics, intelligence, achievement, personality, attitudes, interests, social and economic background and expenditure of time and money. Volume Three, *Counseling Technics in College and Secondary School,* is devoted to a discussion of technics of work with individuals. Thus Volumes Two and Three are concerned primarily with one of the two major tasks of personnel work, namely, the appraisal of an individual's potentialities. They aim to improve the counselor's technics of assembling information about an individual and to give him a better background for understanding the significance of the facts he has collected. It is not the author's intent, however, to present a comprehensive summary of each of the areas included in this volume, but rather to select material of special value to the personnel worker. To some extent, adjustment to individual needs and capacities will be considered also, for the two processes of appraisal and adjustment are separate only in theory.

Group technics, the control of the environment and the making of adjustments to individual needs and capacities will constitute the content of Volume Four, which will summarize investigations relating to the social, extra-curricular, health and religious programs. The fifth volume will cover the fields of vocational guidance and placement.

Compiling the bibliography to accompany each of these sections presented somewhat of a problem. If limited in scope, references important to some individuals would be lacking. If it were made all inclusive, it would become bewildering and unwieldy. The policy pursued in this volume has been to include important bibliographies and

[2] Ruth Strang, *Personal Development and Guidance in College and Secondary School.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934. Pp. 341.

It is hoped that this volume of summaries will be a useful source of information to persons working with high-school and college students and to those preparing to do personnel work. The results of previous investigations, inadequate as they are, contribute something to the understanding of young persons and point the way quite clearly to the need for further research of the individual case study type.

There is no typical adolescent. Each has a distinctive personality pattern. Each individual varies in the degree, if not in the quality, of the characteristics which he possesses. There is almost always some respect in which a person is above average, however low he may be in most ways. Moreover, even a single ability within an individual is not fixed. It fluctuates from time to time with environmental stimuli, or, in Lewin's and Koffka's terminology, with the "field of force."

On the other hand, it is important for the personnel worker to recognize similarities as well as differences among individuals. There are certain characteristics common to the majority of adolescents. There are also certain ranges of ability within which a large percentage of individuals might be expected to fall. Such information about central tendencies is valuable to the personnel worker not only in understanding the exceptional individual, but also in planning programs and curricula for groups.

New York City RUTH STRANG
July 1, 1937

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CHAPTER I

PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT

STUDENT personnel work can never become monotonous because every problem requires a fresh approach. Cases are never exact duplicates of one another. It therefore is impossible, even if it were desirable, to give the personnel worker a formula or prescription for dealing successfully with student problems. It is possible, however, for him to acquire a background which will enable him to deal more successfully with individual problems as they arise.

These personal problems occupy a large part of the personnel worker's day, for he serves the student body as a whole as well as special groups and individuals. It is his primary obligation to help all students to make the most of themselves. In addition, he must work with unusual students whose maladjustments do not require the services of a psychiatrist or other specialist. In the absence of a mental hygiene clinic or its equivalent he frequently must do something about the more serious cases of maladjustment.

INFORMATION ABOUT PROBLEMS

In order to perform these functions the personnel worker needs several kinds of information. First in importance is a specific knowledge of the individuals with whom he is working—a knowledge which of course cannot be obtained from the printed page. But from the printed page he can obtain suggestions for studying individuals.[1]

Second only in importance to a specific knowledge of the individual is a general awareness of the needs and problems of this generation of young people. By reviewing published investigations on the nature of adjustment, methods of studying student problems and needs, the prevalence and kinds of difficulties which high-school and college students are facing, methods of discovering and preventing problems, and suggestions for promoting adjustment the present chapter will attempt to clarify these needs and problems. This approach is positive; it is more than a mere analysis of errors in personality. It has the advantage of directing attention to the possibilities for the

[1] Volume Three of this series of summaries is devoted to technics of work with individuals.

increase of mental health, happiness and efficiency of young people, and of giving information that can be used in bringing about the desired effect.

Information of this kind is useful in at least three ways. First, it helps the personnel worker to understand and to interpret the personal data which he collects about his own students. Second, it reveals "fault lines" in the school, home and community environment, thus helping the educator to recognize conditions that should be corrected. Third, the results of investigations relating to student problems will supply information some of which may be passed on to the student. An adolescent is eager to learn some of these facts and his anxiety is often relieved by the knowledge that others are having the same kind of problems which he is facing.

The nature of adjustment may be discovered through the study of failures and maladjustment as well as through the study of normal development. It is with this fact in view that the investigations of student problems have been summarized.

The Nature of Adjustment

Our knowledge of the nature of adjustment is fragmentary. There is at present no exact and complete anatomy and physiology of the psyche (305a). The fragmentary facts we do possess, however, are better than complete ignorance. Adjustment is a good biological term. It is part of the life process of all living things—of the amoeba as well as of the human being. In the case of human beings living consists of continuous adaptation to their social and physical milieu. It is in the process of maintaining harmony and balance and order in the organism as a whole that personality develops.

If a person's adaptations to his environment are beneficial and adequate for his best development, he has made a good adjustment. If, however, his reactions are harmful to himself or to his associates or if they are inadequate for his best development, he has made a poor adjustment.

Adjustment is continuous.—Adjustment is a process, not a state. An individual cannot be "adjusted" once and for all. New occasions demand new adaptations. There are an infinite number of opportunities to make satisfactory adjustment to the physical and social environment during the period of growth. Especially during adolescence the relative instability of the total behavior pattern offers opportunities for modification in either good or bad directions, and here guidance may be most effective. Since adjustment is continuous throughout life, the personnel worker at all educational levels is

more concerned with helping the student to acquire insight, standards, and methods of meeting difficulties than with supplying final solutions to them. It is more important for the counselor to help students acquire a technic of adjusting to their environment or of changing their environment so that they can live more happily and successfully in it than it is to give them the solution of a particular problem.

Conflict is inevitable.—It is impossible, outside of hypothetical Utopias, to set up a social and economic system that will suit everyone. There are sure to be misfits. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, the process of living demands continuous adjustment. Temporary maladjustment may even be welcomed as a stimulus to growth and a motive for creative work. Christopher Morley (199: 373) humorously expressed this point of view as follows:

> If Mark [Twain] was frustrated and henpecked and edited and repressed, . . . and if that is what frustration does to one, and what being henpecked does to one, then let's send a barrel of the frustration and a crate of hens to every American writer.

Although the striving for a difficult but attainable goal involves pain and toil, it leads ultimately to good adjustment insofar as it results in the best development of the individual. The building of a great personality requires hardships, even tragedy. By thinking of adjustment in terms of growth toward maturity the individual will avoid the danger of giving too much weight to temporary unhappiness which may be merely a stage in progress toward a greater good.

A distinction, however, should be made between a "divine discontent" and the striving for impossible goals. Both involve discomfort and conflict. The former may spur an individual on to achievement far beyond his unmotivated powers, as in the case of "Milton the Blind who looked on Paradise; Beethoven, deaf, who heard great melodies." On the other hand, a goal that is unattainable and an environment that is too complex and difficult paralyze rather than challenge the student's best effort. The consequence is inaction. There is a limit to the amount of striving and strain which an individual can endure. Persons vary in their emotional tensile strength. The development of personality demands a golden mean of hardships.

Adjustment varies with individuals.—Individual differences in adjustment must be recognized by the personnel worker. Students in the same high school or college environment, meeting the same entrance requirements and confronted by the same regulations and standards do not have the same problems of adjustment. Some adjust

with ease to their environment; others experience great difficulty. The same overt behavior may represent good adjustment for one individual and poor adjustment for another. From the standpoint of the student a good deal of this so-called problem behavior is not a problem but a solution. Who is wise enough to define adjustment for another? The personnel worker does not presume to be. All he can do is to ascertain the individual's potentialities as accurately as possible and judge the adjustment in terms of their realization. His standard of good adjustment will be a highly flexible one. It will be in terms of the adequacy of the person's present behavior for the next stage of adjustment. The best personality possible for a particular individual—that is the most definite standard that can be set up. It follows that no two students can be treated in exactly the same way even though their problems seem superficially the same. Unless individual differences in adjustment are recognized there may even be danger in a too persistent pursuing of adjustment as a goal—the danger of reducing the thought, feeling and behavior of unique and delightful personalities to standard patterns.

Adjustment may be achieved in spite of handicaps.—Maturity and an effective personality may be achieved in spite of handicaps. The adjustment of an individual to handicaps is influenced, in the first place, by the time at which the handicap occurs. If, for example, he is born with a physical abnormality and grows up with it, he is likely to become used to it as a part of his physical make-up before the beginning of adolescence. If, on the other hand, he acquires the handicap as he approaches adolescence, the adaptation to this new difficulty is added to the other problems of the period. A second factor in adjustment to a handicap is the setting in which the physical disability was acquired. If it involved a long period of illness and convalescence, the habits of invalidism may have become fairly fixed, and the affected person will continue to demand the privileges of a patient. Previous habits are a third factor in adjustment to a recently acquired handicap. If a person has built habits of fortitude during childhood, he is not likely to be overwhelmed by any new difficulty. A fourth and very important factor is the socio-economic background and the attitude of his parents. If they have the means to provide opportunities for the individual's best development along other lines and if they take a constructive attitude toward the whole situation, they will help him to gain skills and perspective and to direct his attention toward his assets. It is not sympathy that the handicapped person needs but a chance to make good and to make

a place for himself in the world of normal people. Institutions frequently interfere with the individual's adjustment by putting too much emphasis upon the handicap and preventing association with normal persons of the same age. All these factors influence the way the individual perceives his handicap. It is the individual's idea of himself that probably is one of the most potent factors in his adjustment to an irremediable defect.

Adjustment is complex and relative.—It is obvious that there should be individual differences in adjustment in view of the complexity and relativity of the process. There is too great a tendency to treat maladjustment as an entity, as a unit characteristic, rather than as a complex sequence of behavior involving the internal condition of the organism and the external stimuli in the environment. It is impossible to say which of these two groups of factors is the more important. Patterson (*222*) found, under certain laboratory conditions, that the subjective condition of the individual had a greater effect on his reactions than did the actual stimulus or physical situation. Koffka (161), on the other hand, emphasized the role of environmental "forces" in an individual's reaction. Perhaps this term, taken from physics, is not the most appropriate one to use in a psychological discussion. The environment does not exert force or pressure on the individual in a physical sense alone but is actively responded to by the individual. The effect of the environment on the individual, accordingly, seems to depend to a large extent upon the way in which he perceives it. And that is a personal matter. The island of St. Helena was many times larger than Emily Dickinson's garden, but Napoleon died imprisoned and the recluse died a denizen of the universe.

The complexity of adolescent adjustment is vividly expressed by Santayana in the following quotation:

> Youth is far from implying less complexity than age or a meaner endowment, for youth, at least potentially, often has the advantage in these respects. Youth means only less complete adjustment of capacity to opportunity, of intelligence to practice and art. In a fertile mind such want of adjustment intensifies self-consciousness and, because so much that the mind is pregnant with remains unexpressed and untested, it produces a sense of vague profundity which is often an illusion. An unexpressed mind may be deep, but it is none the deeper for not exercising itself successfully on real things; . . . Here are immense endowment and strange incompetence, constant perspicacity and general confusion, entire virtue in the intention, and complete disaster in the result. (258a: 61, 62)

Adjustment may be effected in two main ways.—There are two general ways in which adjustment is effected: (1) through mastery of the environment—changing it to fit oneself, and (2) through changing oneself to fit the environment (319:9-10). The two processes may go on simultaneously.

Sometimes the environment cannot be changed. It presents an insurmountable wall. The individual is "up against it." There is nothing he can do except to change his attitude toward the situation. At times this involves an attitude of waiting until he has grown tall enough to climb over the top. In other cases it involves a recognition and acceptance of hereditary limitations and the making of adaptations in goals and purposes to conform to these limitations. For example, a high school or college student frequently must learn to get emotional satisfaction from the choice of an occupation suited to his ability, rather than from an occupation to which his desires had been attached since early childhood. A person's happiness sometimes becomes established when, definitely recognizing that there are some cherished ambitions which he cannot realize, he ceases to strive after the impossible and directs his efforts toward ends which he can attain. Even rationalization (that is, unloading responsibility from the self to other persons, to chance, etc.) or other escape mechanisms occasionally may be a legitimate form of adjustment when the situation is too painful for the individual to face at a particular moment.

But it is far better, if possible, for the individual to adjust by freeing himself of impediments to progress in attaining "the good life." In this sense adjustment may be defined as

> a process of recovering to an individual the free flow of his own native talents, capacities and interests, freed from the hampering effect of some fixation, some complex, some impeding influence, the cause of which the individual is not always himself fully aware of (291:504).

Good adjustment involves a constellation of beneficial habits readily revised as occasion demands changes in behavior.

Maladjustments are deviations from the commonly accepted culture pattern. They represent a kind of personality development. The process of readjustment is that of habit revision (84). The psychology of adjustment thus becomes the psychology of learning. The same laws apply here as in the acquiring of knowledge and skills. Insight, purpose, practice—all are essential. An individual must have insight into the conditions which underlie his habit patterns; insight into the good which will accrue from the modification of his ways of

thinking, feeling and acting; and insight into the ways and means of effecting the desired changes. Many students have changed their behavior when they saw clearly that such behavior as loud and aggressive talk, carelessness in dress and diffidence in meeting strangers were interfering with their social success.

But insight alone will not insure the building of a new system of thought and action. An active desire must be present to make the changes recognized as necessary. Desire, in this sense, is not inherently a narrow selfish interest in self-development. A social purpose—something outside the individual greater than himself, to which he gives himself—is often the most effective means of modifying his habits. Lack of a dominant purpose is one cause of poor adjustment among youths today. They have thousands of insignificant objectives but no compelling social goal.

Insight, re-enforced by purpose, is dynamic. It results in action if the mechanism for acting is already there and if conditions are favorable. Action that fulfills a desire or a felt need brings satisfaction, and so the new ways of thinking, feeling and acting tend to become established.

There are writers who emphasize one of these factors to the exclusion of the other. Some advise making changes in the attitudes and concepts of the individual while others look to changes in the environment as the best means of securing individual adjustment. The middle-of-the-road point of view recognizes as useful both these methods.

Methods of Studying Student Problems

The methods of studying student problems range from a mere listing of problems to a thorough psychological analysis of individuals. These methods may be classified under the following headings: students' own statements of their problems, records of problems brought to advisers, analysis of deficiencies and needs in the background and activity program of students, problems revealed in interviews and tests, and combinations of these methods.

Students' own reports of their problems.—Adolescents may be problems to themselves—they may be fully aware of certain difficulties. The simplest method of obtaining a list of problems uppermost in the students' minds is that of asking each person to write on separate cards the three most important problems or difficulties which he has experienced within a given period of time (110:152-54) (276:147-51). The use of a card for each problem rather than one sheet for the three problems greatly simplifies the

work of classification and tabulation. Some investigators (37, 279) have increased the value of this method by obtaining supplementary information concerning the problems reported, and others have simplified the mechanics of the procedure by obtaining the information as part of the registration data (253a).

The check list is another method of obtaining the students' estimates of their problems. Boraas (34) in one of the earliest studies of student problems and Smeltzer (268) in 1930 used this method in their investigations building the check list on the basis of students' statements of the difficulties which they had experienced as college freshmen.

The questionnaire is a third way of obtaining from students information regarding their problems. Pressey (241) obtained from 100 college sophomores and juniors answers to five questions concerning each of seven types of problems—vocational, social, family, scholastic, emotional, disciplinary and moral which included those related to the student's general philosophy of life. The five questions were about the nature of the problem, its seriousness, its present status in regard to solution, sources from which help was received and sources from which help might have been received.

The unexplored possibilities of the diary in revealing student problems is suggested by Hill (128) in his entertaining extracts from a college student's diary written in the early days of Harvard College. Detailed reference to the diary as a source of information about adolescents is made in Volume Three.

In spite of their subjective nature these four methods of ascertaining the kinds of problems which seem important to the students themselves are of value to personnel workers. Although individuals do not always diagnose their difficulties accurately and may, in some cases, not wish to report their most vital problems, most of them are able and willing to enlighten authorities concerning the difficulties they are meeting. The success of these methods depends chiefly upon conditions of good rapport in which the interest and co-operation of the students are secured.

Whether questionnaires are signed or not signed seems to affect results in different ways. Garrett (102) found insignificant differences between the percentages of each kind of problem reported by the students who signed the blanks and those who did not. The attitude of students toward the signing of their names would obviously vary with their confidence in the examiner, his position of authority and other factors in the situation.