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ABSTRACT

A study to analyze individual differences in interpersonal styles of students and tc identify behavioral differences in student interactions with adults and peers is reported. The sample consisted of 18 high school males who were observed during two normal school days. Students were observed according to interactions with other students, adults, males, or females: settings where interacticns occur: and content and affective style of the interactions. Results reveal five interactive styles: Group One demonstrates an average amount of interaction: Group Two, a great deal of interaction with peers and little interaction with adults: Group Three, little interaction with peers and a great deal with adults: Group Four, extremely verbal and high participators: and Grcup Five, low participators. Group One individuals fit into the school because they are willing to maintain a "student role" at the expense of allowing a more authentic self to emerge. Groups Two and Three probably engage students in one fashion and adults in another: more research is needed to determine their methods of interaction. Group Four persons dominate interactions so totally that it is difficult for others to make an impact on their world view. Subjects included in Group Five demonstrate some possibilities for maladaption. They view themselves as outsiders and appear anxious and unable to communicate. (Authcr/KC)

NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION OF STUDENT INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS AND PEERS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL[1,2]

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INTRODUCTION

The questions that we would like to raise with you this morning are, what are the characteristics of an individual's interactive style? and what are the implications of this style for adaptation to a specific social environment?

Interaction has been described in order to understand such varied phenomena as the small group, (Bales, 1950, 1970; Hare, 1962), the mother-infant relationship (Clarke-Stewart, 1973) and the relationship between decision making and performance (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Guetzkow, 1955). Rarely, has social interaction been

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analyzed as a component of personality. Harry Stack Sullivan, in his interpersonal theory of psychiatry (1947), suggests that personality exists only as it is expressed in on going interaction. R. F. Bales in his latest book Personality and Interpersonal Behavior (1970) utilizes characteristics of verbal and nonverbal interaction as means of assessing personality types.

We would like to consider the concept of interpersonal style as a component of personality. It is this aspect that is of particular relevance when one attempts to understand the process by which one adapts to his social environment. One's interpersonal style determines how one approaches others and how one is responded to; it determines how one seeks information about the environment; it determines how one manages stress and how one expresses emotionality; it provides the means for social intimacy and for functional role relationships.

What are the aspects of interpersonal style that are important for the coping process. The variable of major importance is simply the quantity of verbal participation. In essence, the degree to which one participates seems to be the most significant dimension of interpersonal style.

There are a variety of categories that have been used to differentiate qualitative differences in interpersonal style. These include cognitive characteristics such as asking for information or help, or providing information, clarification suggestions, or opinions,

(Bales, 1970, Flanders, 1970); emotional characteristics like warmth, aggression, depression, anxiety, dramatization and denial, (Bales 1970, Mann 1967 . Newman in press) and attitudes toward authorities; like counter dependence, dependence, rebelliousness, deference or independence (Mann, 1967). The quality of interpersonal style can be described by the degree to which an individual's expressions vary across any given set of categories as well as by the categories which dominate his interactions.

Method

In the study that we will report to you today, a group of eighteen high school males, who had previously been observed in a semi-structured group situation by B. Newman (in press) were observed during two normal school days. The Ss were accompanied by male observers who were undergrates at a large mideastern university.

Two techniques were used to train the observers. Pairs of observers followed students at each school and compared their coding during several pretest sessions. All four observers coded a television program, Room 222, which involves high school students and teachers.

The reliability of observer pairs in the school was 81%. Reliability of all four observers in coding the television program was 78%. The percent agreement method was used.

The characteristics of social interaction that were coded are listed in Table 1. In devising the category

system certain observations were included in order to take into account the high school setting. A differentiation was made between interactions with adults and peers, and between interactions which focused on school related or non-school related concerns.

Our goals were to characterize individual differences in interpersonal style and toidentify any behavioral differences in student interactions with adults and peers.

Results

In analyzing the data, we have constructed an interaction profile for each subject. The Ss mean score on each variable for two observation periods was converted to a z score in order to compare the behavior of each S. to the mean of the group on each variable. Ss were observed in two different schools. Analyses of variance showed no significant school differences. The interaction profiles revealed five different interactive styles that we would like to present and discuss today. Group 1 is comprised of people who demonstrate an average amount of interaction. Group 2 is characterized by a great deal of interaction with peers and little interaction with adults. Group 3 is characterized by little interaction with peers and greater interaction with adults. Group 4 includes Ss who are extremely verbal; the high participators. Group 5 is the low participators.

Group 1, the average group, includes the greatest number, 7 of eighteen Ss. We call this group the "silent majority" but we would like to point out that although

this group is modal, it is not a majority, and while they are not highly verbal, they are not silent. These boys demonstrate a moderate level of behavior in all categories. No particular categories dominate their interaction nor are there any that are conspicuously absent.

The only exception to this statement is a consistent lack of formality in their interactive behavior. They are individuals who are not very visible in their setting, they tend to be somewhat verbally retentive, and they carry on predominantly casual, informal interactions.

Group 2 includes 3 subjects whose interactions with peers are consistently greater than their interactions with adults. In addition, the interactions of these boys tends to be dominated by affect, particularly expressions that are described as dramatizing and sarcastic teasing. Dramatizing is a category which Bales (1970) uses to describe elaborations on reality, "tall tales," and other boastful expressions. B. Newman found this kind of behavior to be quite prevalent in her small-group study of adolescent boys and Elizabeth Aries (1973) has discussed this quality as being particularly prevalent in male interactions. The characteristic of dramatizing is essentially an attempt at self aggrandizement. The discrepancy in the number of interactions between peers and adults suggests that these boys perceive two differentiated role groups, one which accepts their verbal behavior and one which makes them feel far less comfortable about their interactive style. The use of dramatizing and denial,

and sarcastic teasing coupled with the differentiated targets of interaction suggests to us that these boys are responding to their environment as if it were a source of threat to their self esteem.

Group 3 is our smallest group including only 2 subjects, and to some extent, the most difficult to interpret. The outstanding feature of this group is that both boys have relatively high amounts of interaction with adults and relatively low amounts of interaction with other students. The two Ss are otherwise quite different. S1 is friendly, joking, and warm. S2 is formal, discouraged, and he uses a great deal of dramatizing and denial.

These boys are representative of the socioemotional and the task leaders. They are both comfortable interacting with authorities in the school. Although they have fewer interactions with peers than the average subject, they do maintain contact with peer culture but they perceive accurately that influence and decision making are more likely to occur in the adult domain. These boys do run some risk of losing contact with their peer constituents. Both boys are active in sports. This allows them to maintain peer visibility and contact while increasing their legitimacy as leaders.

Group 4 is composed of three boys who are high participators. They all have comparatively great numbers of interactions with both students and adults. Their interactions have a high affective component. Two of the Ss give the impression of being almost unable to inhibit verbal

expressions. They continuously attempt to draw attention to themselves by interacting with any available listener. The third S seems to have learned to modify his verbal activity. Many of his expressions are affectively neutral. All three boys include sarcasm and teasing as a dominant element in their behavior. The two most talkative Ss tend to use verbal behavior as a means of dissipating anxiety. They are uncomfortable in their setting. The content of their interactions is generally aimed at disparaging or joking about their situation.

The fifth and final group includes three extremely low participators. These are boys who are withdrawn and alienated from their total school environment. One of these boys attended school so infrequently that our observers had to make a number of trips to the school before they could complete their observations. For these boys, silence is an essential element of their personality. They are not only alienated from adults in the school but from peers as well. Their behavior is potentially an indication of more serious maladaptation.

One of the Ss does show a single z score above 0.0, that is, behavior which is of a school-related content. His profile is similar to those of Ss in group 1 and one might guess that the school has a chance of pulling him in if some adequate overtures were made in his direction.

Discussion

A word on the method

We found this technique of observation to be surprising-

ly easy to employ. The observers were able to establish a reasonable degree of agreement about what they saw. They were also quite successful in establishing rapport with their subjects so that the normal flow of daily interactions was minimally interrupted. Only those subjects with girl friends reported some feelings of embarrassment at the observers presence.

The presence of human observers tied us to the observation of specific interactive behaviors that would occur in public. The data are descriptive, therefore, of what one might call the public self. They tend to describe an interplay between person and environment rather than private characteristics of an individual.

What then do our findings have to say about the public aspect of the personality as it comes into contact with a social environment? We have found three groups of people who have a very consistent interactive style in terms of the number of interactions, the kinds of interactions and the targets of interactions. Groups 1, 4 and 5 all exhibit the same unvaried pattern of interaction. What was different about these groups was simply the quantity of interaction.

We would like to consider the implications for adaptation of these three interactive styles. We mentioned earlier that there are some possibilities for maladaptation among the members of group 5. They do not appear to be lighthearted in their silence. They view themselves as outsiders and

they appear anxious and unable to communicate. These people can make little use of their social environment, nor can the social environment make contact with them. Members of this group who tend toward personal instability will tend to continue in that direction independent of interactive circumstance. Also, as an environment becomes hostile or threatening, this person becomes one of the last to know of threat. He also runs the risk of becoming the target of scapegoating, stereotopy, and the displacement of hostility. In a very real sense he is a remote individual in a highly interactive environment.

Group 1 is made up of people who are somewhat inhibited by the formality of the school setting but who are generally able to maintain on-going social relationships within that structure. These people have learned that in school they should be quiet, respect the teacher, be serious, talk about school related topics, talk mostly to other males, and talk more often to peers than to adults. They fit in to the school because they are willing to maintain this "student role" even at the expense of allowing a more authentic self to emerge.

Group four, the high participators, seem to engage the environment with a fury. Appearing to be opposite in behavior from group 5, they run the same risk of being vulnerable because of lack of information. They talk so much and dominate interactions so toally that it is difficult for others to make an impact on their world view. On the

other hand, these boys are much more visible than group 5 or group 1. They have increased visibility among adults and peers. If others respond positively to their energy and style, then they have a much greater chance to experience involvement with the setting than do the boys in the other two groups.

Groups 2 and 3 pose further problems for the understanding of student adaptation which can only be resolved through further data analysis. We can clearly demonstrate that these subjects are making differential responses to particular dimensions of the social environment. They are probably engaging students in one fashion and adults in another. They may even have more finely delineated subgroup responses which add variation to their interpersonal style. In order to assess the aspects of these boy's personality that are expressed in their interactions and to consider the implications for adaptation we will need to analyze interactions with students and interactions with adults separately and create separate interaction profiles for each.

In closing, let us think about how often, in the course of an average day, an individual interacts with other people. Our data tell us that the average student in our sample had 100 interactions inside school in six hours time, that means at least 36,500 interactions in a year, 365,000 interactions in a ten year period, one million interactions in a thirty year period and this assumes

that an individual does not interact with anyone during the other 18 hours of the day. It is quite clear that the science of psychology must take up the study of interactive behavior in order to understand the interface of the personality and the environment.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF INTERACTION CODING CATEGORIES

Categories	Mean	S.D.
Interactions with		
Students	71	33
Adults	17	10
Males	69	33
Females	21	13
Initiator of interaction		
Subject	47	18
Other	41	19
Settings where interactions occur	4	1
Content of the interaction		
School related	50	20
Not school related	36	17
Task related	51	22
Personal	34	16
Joking	13	6
Serious	70	31
Affective style of the interactions		
Formal	6	3
Casual	77	34
Positive	67	32
Neutral	20	11
Negative	3	3
Discouraged	2	1
Dramatizing-denial	10	8
Sarcastic-teasing	14	9

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