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PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON TWO AGE GROUPS DETERMINED BY A "FAIT ACCOMPLI"

From many studies it would appear that parents occupy a key role in the socialization process of the child. The term significant others has been used to refer to mothers and fathers when they are perceived as stressing norms and values rather than roles, (Elkin, 1969) or as models teaching children through their behaviour, (Mead 1934, Brookover et al 1967). Even long after the youth has left home, parental influence may be still seen to affect attitudes and judgements as was pointed out in the Bennington study (Newcomb 1948).

But, there is another competing influence in the socializing of the youth as was pointed out by Utech and Hoving (1969). As the child increases in age, the social reinforcement value of peers seems to increase. Utech and Hoving (1969) showed that conformity to the advice of parents was a decreasing function of age when parents and peers offered conflicting advice. It may be suggested, here, that the influence of parents on values and attitudes varies inversely with the age of the youth.

Studies in dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959) have shown that a person experiencing dissonance may be expected to change his opinion or attitude. Moreover, if his behaviour, contrary to the self-concept, is likely to be known by important other people, example parents, (Brehm 1959) then the self-concept change will be greater than if the consequences remained private. It was suggested here, that personal attitudes and values which were not consonant with those of parents may be changed if a threat is made to report such behaviour to them. Brehm's study (1959) used parents as a reference group and the threat to inform parents of students' discrepant behaviour was considered a "fait accompli" or an event beyond the control of the students.

Drawing partly from the findings of Utech and Hoving (1969) and those of Brehm (1959), it was assumed that:

- a) if students are asked to express their personal attitudes and then told that these will be shown to their parents that there will be tension which will cause them to make changes, and
- b) the younger the child, the greater will be the tendency to change.

It was reasoned that significant changes made after the introduction of the "fait accompli" were indications of parental influence.

METHOD

Instrument

A list of subjects taught in high school was prepared so that each subject could be rated on a five point scale.

Sample

165 grade VII and grade XI students from a suburban Montreal area high school formed the subjects (Ss) of this study. Ss were randomly assigned to an experimental and control group for each grade. Table 1 shows composition and numbers in each group:

TABLE 1
Sample Distribution

| Group | Grade VII | Grade XI |
|--------------|-----------|----------|
| Control | 41 | 41 |
| Experimental | 41 | 42 |

Procedure

1. Ss in all groups were asked to rate school subjects on the five point scale of the instrument.
2. Instruments were collected.
3. Experimental groups were told: "I did not say that I will be showing this rating form to your parents. I am going to give you new forms to fill out. Remember, they will be shown to your parents." New instruments were then distributed, completed and collected.
4. Control groups were told: "Your forms are not neat enough for school students. Please do them again." New instruments were distributed, completed and collected.

RESULTS

TABLE 2
Percentage response for the four groups

| Group | Responses remaining unchanged | Responses changed |
|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Grade VII | | |
| Control | 82.19 | 17.81 |
| Experimental | 63.80 | 36.20 |
| Grade XI | | |
| Control | 91.75 | 8.25 |
| Experimental | 84.88 | 15.12 |

Table 2 shows an increase in the number of changed responses in the experimental groups in both grade levels. This increase was brought about by the introduction of the "fait accompli." The data was tested for significance with the use of Chi square tables.

TABLE 3
Actual number of subject responses for each grade level

| | Grade VII | Grade XI |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Control | 374 | 424 |
| Experimental | 292 | 393 |
| $\chi^2 = 30.00$ | $df = I p < .01$ | $\chi^2 = 4.64$ |
| | | $df = I p < .05$ |

It was noted in table 3 that the changes brought about by the introduction of the "fait accompli" reached the assumed level of significance. Further, the probability of change was lower for grade VII (.01) than for grade XI (.05).

DISCUSSION

Possible explanations for change of attitude may be due to a desire, generally among both groups, to please parents or to avoid holding discrepant values from those of their parents. A slightly greater tendency to do this was found among students in the lower grades. School counsellors may find this knowledge useful in discussing course selections and/or vocational planning with younger groups.

In the matter of direction of change, it may be assumed that where a previous low value became high after the "fait accompli," there was a desire to bring personal values in line with those of the parents. But where a previous high value became a low value, one may assume that there was a desire to show variance in attitude or that the ensuing tension disclosed an unconscious rejection of parental values.

Users of the WAIS have found that where there is a large discrepancy between verbal and performance scores, with the latter being greater by a standard deviation or more, a possible explanation may be an unconscious rejection of parental values. One student who showed this disparity in the WAIS, was found to give also in the experiment low ratings before the introduction of the "fait accompli." Further research is needed to examine the extent to which an attitude questionnaire may corroborate the assumptions of the WAIS in this matter of unconscious rejection of parental values.

The size of the sample was not large enough to make any claim of generality. Further research aimed at checking these assumptions and results should include larger samples. Also, a five point scale may not be considered adequate to measure one's attitude to a school subject. Does the perception of a school subject include attitude to the teacher of the subject? The investigator was concerned with issue of parental influence alone as it affected the attitude of students at the time of testing.

Interesting observations were made when parental anecdotes and teachers' comments were considered as correlates of performance on the attitude questionnaire. One student who gave a low rating on most subjects had the following comment made by his teacher: "Student is immature and is too much protected by his mother." Another student who gave lower rating in the second form had the comment by his mother urging that S should buckle down and work harder at home. There does seem to be a relationship between performance on the attitude questionnaire and parental attitude to student and subject which warrants further research.

Further research into the area of socio-economic status and performance on the attitude questionnaire may yield fruitful results. Elder (1963), Rosenthal (1966) and Pederson and Barrados (1968) have shown that parents of only certain social classes are considered as significant others to their children. However, within the limits imposed by the design of this study, this investigator found it a comforting thought that parental influence was a significant factor in the socializing process of the youth.

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L'INFLUENCE DES PARENTS AUPRES DE DEUX GROUPES D'ETUDIANTS D'AGE DIFFERENT, EN UTILISANT UN "FAIT ACCOMPLI"

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On a examiné l'influence que les parents ont exercée sur deux groupes d'étudiants d'âge différent de l'école secondaire. Deux groupes de quatre-vingt-deux (82) et de quatre-vingt-trois (83) sujets furent choisis parmi des étudiants de septième et de onzième année. Chacune des expériences a été conduite selon la méthode de différenciation ("a variation of the method of difference type of design"). On a évalué les sujets en utilisant une échelle de cinq points. Alors que les sujets du groupe contrôle durent recommencer l'exercice de façon à remettre une copie soignée, les sujets du groupe expérimental furent avertis que leurs parents verraient l'évaluation de leurs travaux. Cette façon de procéder permettait d'établir comme un "fait accompli" l'influence des parents. Les résultats ont démontré qu'il y avait eu des changements significatifs dans les réactions des sujets, tant au niveau de la septième qu'à celui de la onzième année. De plus, on a constaté que les changements avaient été plus nombreux chez les plus jeunes. Le désir de plaire aux parents était vraiment prédominant.