

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ACCEPTANCE OF SECONDARY GROUPS AS REFERENCE GROUPS¹

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The relationship between man and the groups in which he moves interested Adler, as it interests present-day social psychologists. The importance of understanding the dynamics of this relationship was directly expressed by him in the following passage:

In order to understand what goes on in an individual, it is necessary to consider his attitude toward his fellow men. The relationships of people to one another in part exist naturally and as such are subject to change. In part they take the form of institutionalized relationships which arise from the natural ones. These institutionalized relationships can be observed especially in the political life of nations, in the formation of states, and in community affairs. Human psychological life can not be understood without the simultaneous consideration of these coherences (2, pp. 127-128).

When Adler tied the concepts of identification and empathy (2, pp. 135-137) to the concept of social interest, he came close to describing the essence of reference-group feelings as they are commonly understood today. "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (2, p. 135), for example, may be a bit poetic for current scientific taste, but it is an essentially valid description of what we call "personal involvement," *a sine qua non* of the reference group concept. When applied to cultures and communities, as Adler applies them, these phrases essentially express, in figurative language, the acceptance of group standards, *mores*, and goals.

The concept of reference group is a relatively recent emergent construct in social psychology. Developing out of the need for an explanatory principle to clarify the meaning of the behavior of the individual in a social milieu defined by groupings of various kinds, it has been used to refer to *the groups with which an individual manifests a psychological identification*. Although research workers using the concept may have dealt variously with self-judgement (11), morale (14), conformity (3, 15), organizational behavior (10), prejudice (1, 6), the

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acquisition of social and political attitudes (16), status ratings (9), or loyalty (5), their findings gained meaning only by reference to the groups in which their subjects had their psychological anchorages.

The *existence* of such anchorage (or identification) might be signified in various degrees by willingness to be publicly identified with the group, by the experience of personal involvement in its fate, and by a dedication to its goals. The *result* of that state might be conformity to the *mores* of the group, interiorization of its standards, and willingness to accept its guidance in personal decisions. However indicated, the acceptance of any group as a reference group is basically a state of feeling: a feeling of *being* an integral part of a larger unit, if group membership has been consummated; a feeling of *wanting* to be part of it, if actual membership has not been achieved.

Although the process of developing reference-group feelings toward any given group is personal and idiosyncratic, the object of such feelings may be institutionally defined, impersonal, and subject to little, incomplete, or no actual personal contact. It can be characterized by arbitrary geographical boundaries, by religious dogmas, by occupational activities, by possessions, by social status, by sex, or by age. It may be rigidly organized or completely unorganized. Its one necessary quality lies in the definition given it by the individual.

Several studies have indicated that variations in patterns of membership behavior are associated with variations in depth of reference-group feeling (7, 8, 17). Those who tend to feel relatively greater identification with a group tend also to be more willing to serve it. The loyal citizen, the good organization man, the dependable fighting man would all come under this rubric. The prediction of this relationship between specific individual and given group is obviously of great practical importance.

From a theoretical point of view, the bridge between individual dynamics and social behavior remains a tantalizing enigma. Elaborated speculation is not lacking in this area, but solid, empirical data is almost invisible. See Guetzkow (5, pp. 19-22). Though much work is being carried out with primary or small groups, this statement is especially true concerning the positive aspects of the individual's relations with his *secondary* groups. While the characteristics of the *groups* evoking positive responses have received a good deal of attention, the characteristics of the *individuals* responding positively to large and impersonal groups have largely been neglected, probably on the assumption that individuals respond to groups in terms of the

realistic functioning of the latter. The present investigator, however, has found some evidence, in an earlier study, that seems to point to the operation of a generalized acceptance tendency, more clearly expressive of the member than of the group to which he was responding (7). In the study to which we are referring, this tendency was shown specifically in relation to the self, to a new membership group, and to the subject's peers in the new group. These findings suggested the value of further exploration of the relationship of personal dynamics to acceptance of new groups as reference groups—specifically, large, impersonal, and formally organized groups with all phases of which the individual member can have only limited contact.

The data reported below were collected as part of a program of exploratory studies dealing with the identification of factors associated with variation in the acceptance, by new members, of a secondary group as a reference group.

The personal characteristics selected for investigation in the study with which we shall deal here were *ease in interpersonal contacts* and several dynamics which seemed to be related to performance on the F scale (1): *sense of victimization*, *authoritarian submission*, *cynicism*, and *lack of self-confidence*. This terminology is taken from Webster, *et al.* (18, pp. 77-81).

The "group" used as the focus for acceptance was a large publicly-supported educational institution in an Eastern urban setting. To many of its students this institution appeared to be a last resource for a college degree, which they used *faut de mieux*. This sense of having no choice, of being arbitrarily involved with the group (the college as a whole) through the coercion of circumstances, suggests that attitudes developed in relation to it could be expected to be similar, in many respects, to attitudes developed toward other groups or collectives of which one might become a part without any real alternative: communities, nations, business organizations, the armed forces, etc.

It was hypothesized that "acceptance" of the college as a reference group would be (a) *positively* related to *ease in interpersonal contacts* and *authoritarian submission*; and (b) *negatively* related to *sense of victimization*, *cynicism*, and *lack of self-confidence*.

The first hypothesis was based on two assumptions: (1) that relatively greater ease in interpersonal contacts would make contacts with some members of a new group relatively more pleasant and that this feeling would be globally projected to the group as a whole; and (2) that individuals who accept and identify with authority would be

most likely to accept and identify with almost any group functioning in a culturally prescribed manner, and particularly with one exhibiting a hierarchical authoritarian structure which is endowed with some degree of power relative to the individual.

The second hypothesis rests on several considerations: (1) the assumption that an individual who shows a generalized sense of victimization to a relatively high degree will associate that feeling with every group with which he comes into contact and will therefore be unable to identify with any group; (2) impressions derived from a series of interviews conducted during a preliminary phase of the project that students who tended toward cynical attitudes tended also to insulate themselves from attachments to groups; and (3) the assumption that lack of self-confidence would normally be accompanied by apprehension of rejection by a new group, which would in turn interfere with the individual's ability to accept and identify with a new group early in his experience with it.

PROCEDURE

Subjects: The subjects were 73 unselected male freshmen in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who had been on the campus for about three months. They comprised the entire male contingent of five sections of the Freshman Orientation course, a non-credit course required of all entering students.

Instruments: (1) Acceptance of the college as a reference group was measured by a questionnaire especially designed for this purpose, composed of 58 multiple-choice items and having a corrected reliability coefficient of .82 (Spearman-Brown formula). The items covered six aspects of reference-group feeling and behavior: personal involvement, valence of the group, influence of the group, public identification, interaction with the group, and evaluation of the group. The following are sample items for the first five aspects. "If you were to learn from the newspapers that — had been attacked by a Congressman or Senator, how would you feel about it?" "Would you like to spend more time at the — if you could?" "If you were looking for people who might serve as models to pattern yourself by, among which of the following groups do you think you would most probably find such models?" "When you are introduced to a new group, and the person introducing you says, 'He (she) goes to —,' how do you honestly feel?" "How active are you in the groups (formal and informal) with which you are connected here?" This questionnaire had been validated in a previous investigation (8) by two methods: (a) reference to actual sub-group participation of subjects scoring at the upper and lower extremes of the response range, and (b) interview follow-ups of "high" and "low" acceptors.

(2) *Ease in interpersonal relations* was measured by a group of 15 true-false items, developed for this study, which had an odd-even reliability co-efficient of .74 (corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula.) Some sample questions from this instrument are: "Do you feel that you are accepted and liked by *most* people that know you?" "Do you tend to wind up on the fringe of things after an evening at some social affair?" "Do you find that you really do not know many new people in your classes, even after meeting with them for several months?"

(3) Four different groups of true-false items originally tested by Webster, *et al.* (18), were used in slightly amended form to measure *sense of victimization, authoritarian submission, cynicism, and lack of self-confidence* respectively. These four

dynamics were selected on the basis of a priori judgment concerning their relevance to our population from a questionnaire of 123 items, representing 13 different personality dynamics and reported to have a reliability coefficient of .88 and a correlation of .74 with the F scale. Time limitations prevented us from including all 13 dynamics. According to their report, Webster, *et al.* grouped the items on a theoretical rather than a statistical basis. Used discretely with our sample, these item-groupings had respective reliability coefficients (corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula) as follows: sense of victimization (9 items) .50; authoritarian submission (13 items) .60; cynicism (15 items) .61; lack of self-confidence (10 items) .58.

(4) One additional measure, called "stereotypes" of group members, was used as a follow-up on the findings of the earlier study referred to above (7). This measure consisted of a list of 137 selected adjectives, which subjects indicated as being applicable or not applicable to "most students at (*their own*) College." The scoring of this list was so derived that it yielded a "pleasantness-unpleasantness" estimate of peers in the group. For details on derivation and scoring of the "stereotype" list see Hartley (7, pp. 16-17).

Collecting the Data: The questionnaires were administered to relatively small groups of subjects (10 to 20) during two regular meetings of the Freshman Orientation program of the College, with the Acceptance Questionnaire being given first. The item-groupings dealing with personality dynamics were interspersed among a number of other questionnaire segments dealing with different aspects of groups and group-related attitudes and activities. Absentees were followed up for individual testing to rule out the possible operation of a relevant selective factor in our sample of subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The various measures of personality tendency correlated with scores on the Acceptance Questionnaire as shown in Table I. These correlations offer confirmation of our first hypothesis. The second

TABLE I. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SCORES ON THE ACCEPTANCE QUESTIONNAIRE AND THE VARIOUS MEASURES OF PERSONALITY TENDENCY

(a) ease in interpersonal contacts	.28 ($p < .02$)*
(b) authoritarian submission	.46 ($p < .001$)
(c) sense of victimization	-.05**
(d) cynicism	-.12**
(e) lack of self-confidence	-.14**
(f) "stereotype" list (judgments of peers)	.30 ($p < .01$)

*For 73 subjects, correlations between .23 and .26 (inclusive), are significant at about a p level of .05; those between .27 and .29 are significant at about the .02 level; and those of .30 and above are significant at the .01 level and below.

**Not significant.

hypothesis was not confirmed since the correlations are not significant; yet it should be noted that they are all negative thus tending in the expected direction.

The pattern of the correlations is especially interesting in the light of the recent accumulation of studies (3, 4, 12, 13) calling into question the meaningfulness of responses to the F scale. Although four of our item-groupings (*b*, *c*, *d*, and *e*) were drawn from a "personality"

test correlating highly with the F scale, and these four were all scored in the same direction, only one of these groupings showed a positive correlation with the Acceptance Questionnaire. This indicates that negative as well as positive responses were used liberally. We conclude that in these data there is little evidence of a single pervasive response set to acquiesce which would influence reactions to all items.²

The fact that *authoritarian submission* shows a much closer association with acceptance of the college than does *ease in interpersonal contacts* may have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between an individual's attitudes toward his face-to-face groups and his attitudes toward his secondary groups. It is often assumed, for example, that large-group identifications are mediated through primary-group experiences, and that the quality of these, in turn, depend largely on the social effectiveness of the individual. We believe our findings raise some questions concerning the validity of the assumption of this sequence.

The pattern of intercorrelations among the variables that related significantly to acceptance, and the level of various combinations of variables used in multiple correlations with acceptance scores lend some support to the foregoing suggestion. Tables 2 and 3 present these data.

TABLE 2. INTERCORRELATIONS AMONG VARIABLES SIGNIFICANTLY RELATED TO "ACCEPTANCE"

	1	2	3
1. Authoritarian submission	—	.26	.16
2. Ease in interpersonal contacts		—	.01
3. Judgments of peers			—

TABLE 3. MULTIPLE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN "ACCEPTANCE" (y) AND DIFFERENT COMBINATIONS OF VARIABLES

Ry authoritarian submission, ease in interpersonal contacts	.48
Ry authoritarian submission, judgments of peers	.52
Ry ease in interpersonal contacts, judgments of peers	.41
Ry authoritarian submission, ease in interpersonal contacts, and judgments of peers	.54

²Webster, *et al.* also report evidence that "a general tendency to agree" was not characteristic of the sample of 441 subjects responding to the 667 items from which the scale of 123 items was selected (18, p. 76).

Although *ease in interpersonal contacts* correlates almost equally, and significantly (at the .05 level of confidence), with *authoritarian submission* and "acceptance," it adds little when combined with the former in accounting for variance in the latter. This suggests that the variable measured by the *authoritarian submission* items was also involved somehow in the judgments the subjects made of their own social ease.

This suggestion is substantiated by the partial correlations presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. PARTIAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN "ACCEPTANCE" (y) AND SELECTED VARIABLES

Ry authoritarian submission ease in interpersonal contacts	.42
Ry ease in interpersonal contacts authoritarian submission	.19
Ry authoritarian submission judgment of peers	.44
Ry ease in interpersonal contacts judgments of peers	.29
Ry judgments of peers authoritarian submission	.26
Ry judgments of peers ease in interpersonal contacts	.31

We may note in Table 4 that partialling out *ease in interpersonal contacts* from the correlation between *authoritarian submission* and "acceptance" has little effect on the latter. When, however, *authoritarian submission* is partialled out of the correlation between *ease of interpersonal contacts* and "acceptance," the correlation is reduced below its former level of significance. The relationship between *judgments of peers* and "acceptance," on the other hand, is changed very little by eliminating the effect of either of the other two variables.

The question of why *authoritarian submission* and *ease in interpersonal contacts* should be tied together in this way is not easily answered. If we assume that "social interest," as used by Adler, is closely related to "acceptance of the group" as we are using the term, this tie might be interpreted as an indication of the validity of Adler's statement that "social interest" and "normal adjustment" are closely related. On the other hand, it is equally possible that the explanation lies in the same rationale that underlies the connection between *authoritarian submission* and acceptance of the college as a reference group.

Inspection of the items used to measure *authoritarian submission*, reproduced below, reveals that the first five deal with attitude toward parents, the next four express feelings about the state, and the last four indicate a respect for those occupying a position of power and importance.

Scoring**	Items*
T	One of my aims in life is to accomplish something that would make my parents proud of me.
T	Parents are much too easy on their children nowadays.
T	Children should associate more with children and less with their elders.
T	It is a pretty callous person who does not feel love and gratitude toward his parents.
F	At times I have very much wanted to leave home.
T	Disobedience to the government is never justified.
T	Army life is a good influence on most young men.
T	It is the duty of a citizen to support his country right or wrong.
T	Only a fool would try to change our American way of life.
T	It's a good thing to know people in the right places so you can get traffic tags, and such things, taken care of.
T	I would dislike being a member of a leaderless group.
T	When I take a new job, I like to be tipped off on who should be gotten next to.
T	I like to know some important people because it makes me feel important.

*As selected from Webster, *et al.* (18, p. 78).

**"T" and "F" as shown here are the responses that were scored as indicating the presence of this variable.

It would be difficult to deny that respect for parents, the state, and established power are culturally approved sentiments. It seems logical to assume that a high score on these items indicates a tendency to "go along with" the *status quo*, to accept it. Those who accept some aspects of the culture are likely to accept others, including the culturally defined and accepted groups in which they find themselves. The decision to join the group in question may, in fact, simply be a reflection of the individual's acceptance of the cultural evaluation of that class of groups (colleges, in this case). Once a nominal member, the tendency to accept the *status quo* is enough to account for the rest.

So, too, we might explain the relationship between *ease in interpersonal contacts* and *authoritarian submission*. None will deny that social ease is a culturally valued quality. Those who accept the culture generally may be expected to perceive themselves in culturally acceptable terms and so report. Accepting social ease as a good thing, they see themselves as partaking of it, and indicate this in their responses. (Since all our data are based on self-report, we have no way of checking on the validity of subjects' perceptions.) There is, of course, the alternative possibility that those who accept the tenets of the culture *do* move in it with greater ease than those who question or rebel. Accepting the culture, they have no reason to doubt themselves. The "feeling of belongingness" Adler (2, p. 138) posits as characteristic of social interest would be theirs almost inevitably.

The literature of psychological research suggests that we find no difficulty with the concept of hostile or aggressive personality tendencies. Why not, then, the "acceptant" personality? Such a one would accept himself, his peers, a way of life, and any socially indicated group. Guetzkow's "habit of loyalty" (5, p. 42) would be characteristic of him. He would, in general, tend to make a good member of any group acceptable to the larger culture of which he partakes.

The data reported above hold special interest because of the nature of the institution in which they were collected. The college is regarded in the community as "liberal" in relation to the social and political inclinations of its students, who pride themselves on individualism and disdain conformity. The accepted classroom attitude is one of challenge and scepticism. The *mores* of the peer group seem to have nothing in common substantively with the items in the *authoritarian submission* questionnaire; yet our subjects can apparently accept both. The dynamic of accepting rather than the substance of what is accepted seems to be involved here.² These considerations suggest that the precise nature of the functioning of any given group may be of less importance in motivating loyalty than is commonly asserted. The decisive dynamics may rest, rather, with quite global and generalized qualities which reside in the individual who occupies membership status.

It seems worth noting that our subjects' *judgment of their peers* (in terms of characteristics denoting degrees of pleasantness) seem to have little relation to either *authoritarian submission* or *ease in interpersonal contacts* though it does account for some of the variance in acceptance of the college. (The latter situation may be in part an artifact of the two tests, since the Acceptance Questionnaire also contains some items asking for judgments about peers, though not the same kinds of judgments called for by the "stereotype" list. It is logical to assume that those who find their fellow group members relatively high in characteristics rated as "pleasant" will also find them compatible in other ways.) This lack of correlation between *authoritarian submission* and *judgments of peers* may indicate the operation of a reality factor in addition to a global attitudinal factor in relation to acceptance of the group, or it may indicate the existence of two independent

²This tendency is reminiscent of Bass' "social acquiescence" (3), and descriptions of the "conformist personality" by several other workers (1, 6). Although it is referred to as "Babbitry" by Bass and has been connected with high degrees of ethnic prejudice in previous studies (1, 6), we believe these qualities are simply characteristic of the culture it reflects rather than intrinsic aspects of the tendency itself.

"acceptance" factors, one being person-oriented and the other culture- or institution-oriented. Both contribute to the prediction of acceptance of a new group having the characteristics we have described.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Adler's descriptions of *social interest* seem to relate it in several ways to the concept of *reference group* as used in contemporary social psychology. This concept offers an explanatory principle for many aspects of social behavior which in the past have been treated discretely and classified under a variety of rubrics. Despite the importance of understanding the psychological dynamics of reference-group membership, empirical research literature is conspicuously lacking in data in this area, particularly in relation to the personal qualities of the individual and his ability to identify with secondary (i.e. large, impersonal) groups. In previous studies the present investigator has found suggestive indications of the functioning of a generalized personality variable which seems relevant to this concern, and the present investigation is an attempt (1) to collect further evidence of such functioning, and (2) to begin to specify the nature of the variable (or variables).

About three months after admission, 73 male freshman students in a large municipal college in the East responded to questionnaires designed to measure respectively their "acceptance" of the school as a reference group, their *ease in interpersonal contacts*, their *judgments of their peers*, and four different personality dynamics, referred to as *sense of victimization*, *authoritarian submission*, *cynicism*, and *lack of self-confidence*.

The hypotheses were advanced that "acceptance" of the college as a reference group would be (a) *positively* related to *ease in interpersonal contacts* and to *authoritarian submission* shown; and (b) *negatively* related to *sense of victimization*, *cynicism*, and *lack of self-confidence*.

Correlational analyses of the data supported the first hypothesis. With regard to the second hypothesis, the obtained correlations were not statistically significant; yet it should be noted that they were all negative thus tending in the expected direction.

When the significant results are considered in relation to substantive aspects of the measures by which they were achieved, they seem to justify the following conclusions: The tendency toward *authoritarian submission* is involved with the process of accepting a new secondary group (of a specific kind) as a reference group. Because the measure for *authoritarian submission* actually seems to be

measuring acceptance of the cultural *status quo*, the response tendency elicited by it can be expected to operate generally in relation to culturally prescribed aspects of the individual's experience, hence toward the secondary groups that are a normal part of his culture. There is evidence for "acceptant" response tendencies oriented toward *persons* which may operate differently from those oriented toward *institutions*. While both *person-oriented* and *institution-oriented* response tendencies contribute to the individual's acceptance of a newly acquired secondary group as a reference group, the latter seem to be involved to a much greater extent.

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