

SUPERIORITY OF CHILDHOOD ACCOUNT OVER CURRENT ACCOUNT FOR JUDGING CURRENT SELF IMPRESSIONS¹

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The various psychodynamic views of personality seem to agree that an individual's account of his childhood is more critical to his personality than his account of his current status. The present study is an attempt to test this commonly held understanding experimentally. More specifically, it is an attempt to ascertain whether the current self impressions of an individual can be predicted more effectively from knowledge of his account of his early life, or from knowledge of his account of his current life.

Little is known today about the variables which are significant when one seeks to predict an individual's responses to various kinds of self-report devices. Attempts to ascertain some of these variables have been reported by Luft (5), Giedt (2), Borke and Fiske (1), and Grigg (3). But to date there has been no study of the relative effectiveness of various life periods in an individual's account of himself in providing cues for making predictions about him.

METHOD

Two men, aged 28 and 31, served as subjects. The experimenter had met them when they applied to a state agency for employment. After they had been informed that they were employed, the experimenter explained that he desired autobiographies for some research at the university. He gave the subjects an outline to follow, indicating which areas should be included. For example, "Father: What kind of person was he, how did he get along with you, with others? Describe him as a person." To our knowledge, the instructions did not introduce a bias in favor of one life period over another.

The subjects were also asked to complete an adjective check list, to indicate their current self impressions. The list consisted of three parts of 20 adjectives each, and the subject was instructed to elect from each part five adjectives he felt most accurately described him.

The autobiographies and the completed check lists were mailed anonymously to the university (which is not officially associated with the state agency). The subjects did not know how many others had been asked to participate in the study, nor were they informed as to its actual nature. They believed that the study was concerned with a comparison of normal individuals with neurotics.

The autobiographies thus obtained were divided into two parts. The first part contained the subject's childhood up to, but not including, adolescence. The second part included his current status, his attitude toward work, toward his

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family, neighbors, recreations, etc. Typescripts of the two parts were mimeographed separately.

There were two groups of 30 judges each, undergraduate students who had completed one to three courses in psychology. Group I read the early account of Subject A and the current account of Subject B. Group II read the current account of Subject A and the early account of Subject B. Then both groups were asked to postdict for each subject, which adjectives on the check list he had marked, and which he had left blank.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analyzed by a 2 x 2 Latin Square analysis of variance, called Type II by Lindquist (4). The means and standard deviations of the judges' postdictions of the subjects' responses to the adjective check list, by the variables in this study, are shown in Table 1. From this it may be seen that the accuracy of postdictions is higher when cues from early accounts were utilized than when cues from current accounts were used.

TABLE 1. MEANS AND SD'S OF NUMBER OF AGREEMENTS, ABOVE CHANCE, BETWEEN POSTDICTIONS AND SUBJECTS' RESPONSES TO 60-ITEM ADJECTIVE CHECK LIST, BY VARIABLES STUDIED.

Variable	Mean	SD
Early account	8.13	3.78
Current account	6.47	3.21
Subject A	7.20	3.67
Subject B	7.40	3.66
Group I judges	7.50	3.76
Group II judges	7.10	3.55

TABLE 2. ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF EARLY VS. CURRENT ACCOUNT (TIME) AS BASIS FOR POSTDICTIONS OF SUBJECTS' RESPONSES.

Source of variation	df	ms	F
Between effects	59		
Subjects x time	1	2.40	1.29
Error (<i>b</i>)	58	1.86	
Within effects	60		
Time	1	83.33	5.92*
Subjects	1	1.20	0.00
Error (<i>w</i>)	58	14.07	
Total	119		

*Significant at .025 level.

The analysis of variance of these data (Table 2) shows that the superiority of postdictions based on early as compared with current accounts is statistically significant ($p = .025$). No significant differences in accuracy occur between postdictions for Subjects A and B. The difference in accuracy of judgment between the two groups of judges is also not significant.

What kinds of information may have given more cues to the judges when reading childhood experience as compared with current status? Examination of the autobiographies would seem to indicate that in the childhood part both subjects devoted a good deal of detailed attention to relationships with parents and to type of discipline

within the childhood home, whereas in the current-status part, they tended to characterize relationships to "significant others," i.e., the wife and children, only briefly. Also, in the childhood sections there appears to be more self-appraisal, whereas in the current-status sections, there is more factual anecdotal narration. Maybe the autobiographer is more defensive about current interactions than about those more distant in time and, to him, apparently less related to his adult behavioral role.

SUMMARY

Two groups of naive judges attempted to postdict the current self impressions (responses to an adjective check list) of two autobiographers. The postdictions were significantly more accurate ($p = .025$) when based on cues from childhood accounts than when based on cues from current accounts.

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