

FEELINGS OF INFERIORITY AND THE DEPRECIATION
OF OTHERS: A RESEARCH REVIEW AND
THEORETICAL REFORMULATION¹

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One of the key concepts used by Adler in his attempt to conceptualize the dynamics of human behavior was that of *inferiority feelings*. In a way, feelings of inferiority represent a common denominator in all people. The very biological nature of man at birth is that he indeed *is* inferior. The infant is unable to satisfy many of his own needs and would not survive were it not for the efforts of the more superior adults around him.

Though feelings of inferiority may represent an important element in the motivational systems of all people, individuals will differ as to the *degree* to which they feel inferior, and perhaps even more significant, the *way* in which they attempt to cope with these feelings, namely, according to their style of life. Since all people presumably have feelings of inferiority, the question arises as to why some individuals develop a neurotic style of life while others do not. According to Adler, such things as parental neglect and rejection, excessive pampering, and an inferior body organ can serve to intensify the individual's early feelings of inferiority (2). The essential difference between the formation of a neurotic or non-neurotic style of life depends upon the intensity of the inferiority feelings that the person struggles to overcome, and the extent to which his potentiality for social interest has remained undeveloped.

It should be noted that in describing the neurotic, Adler was not referring to neurosis as an entity, but rather as an orientation toward life. Thus, the so-called neurotic style of life actually refers to certain general characteristics, and people are apt to differ in the extent to which they manifest these characteristics.

The neurotic's sense of adequacy is so tenuous and insecure that he continually is threatened by the adequacy and superiority he perceives in other people. Thus, in describing the neurotic style of overcoming inferiority, Adler has noted that particularly characteristic is the *tendency to depreciate others* (2, pp. 267-269). By depreciating and

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belittling another person, says Adler, the individual is able to raise his own self-esteem by evaluating himself relative to this other person.²

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the depreciation tendency from two points of view—empirical and theoretical. From the empirical point of view, research studies relevant to the depreciation tendency will be reviewed. The second section of the paper will utilize these research findings, as well as theoretical speculations in a number of related areas, to offer a theoretical discussion and reformulation of the relationship between feelings of inferiority and the depreciation tendency.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In attempting to review the research literature on the relationship between feelings of inferiority and the tendency to depreciate others, one encounters two basic problems. The first is *where to begin*; the second is *where to stop*. Both these problems stem from the same state of affairs, namely that there appear to have been no studies carried out which directly test the depreciation tendency.³ However, a number of problem areas which seem to be *indirectly* relevant to the relationship between inferiority feelings and depreciation of others have received a good deal of research attention. Thus, by selectively reviewing research in such areas as the self-concept, person perception, assumed similarity, empathy, and prejudice, it might be possible to arrive at some better understanding of the extent to which research findings have confirmed Adler's concept of the depreciation tendency.

Attitudes toward Self and Others

The depreciation tendency hypothesizes that the derogatory attitude that one has toward others is a function of the intensity of one's own feelings of inferiority. The stronger the feelings of personal inferiority, the greater the likelihood that a person will hold negative attitudes toward others. Consequently, the body of research on the relationship between attitudes toward self and attitudes toward others is relevant to the depreciation tendency.

²This aspect of the neurotic style may be likened to what Stephen Potter has termed "oneupmanship." According to Haley's humorous but succinct interpretation of the end goal of oneupmanship, "To be 'one-up' is technically defined as that psychological state of an individual who is not 'one-down'" (24, p. 3). The parallel to Adler's description of the depreciation tendency is evident.

³Rotter (46) has similarly indicated that despite the fact that many psychologists implicitly seem to accept some of Adler's theoretical notions, relatively little has been done to study these concepts experimentally.

Impetus for much of the research on attitudes toward self (i.e., the self-concept) and attitudes toward or perception of others has come from Rogerian theory (45). At first blush, this area might seem like a relatively easy one in which to do research. Closer observation reveals that it is fraught with theoretical and methodological problems (60), some of which will be discussed further below.

The original studies were derived from Rogers' view that if an individual does not accept his own self, then he will not be able to show acceptance toward others (45). (a) The earliest research on this relationship between self-acceptance and acceptance of others, studied the statements made by a small group of clients in therapy (49, 54). (b) Later studies used questionnaires to measure acceptance (3, 37, 44) and similar approaches (30, 31, 48).

(a) Scheerer (49), by analyzing the statements of 10 clients in brief, non-directive therapy, attempted to study the relationship between self-acceptance and the acceptance of others, as well as any changes in acceptance that might have occurred as a function of therapy. By means of judges' ratings, she found that clients' statements reflecting self-acceptance were positively related to their statements indicating their acceptance of others. She also found both acceptance of self and of others increased during the second half of therapy. The temptation is to interpret these findings as demonstrating that therapy increased the clients' self-acceptance, which consequently enabled them to achieve a better acceptance of others. As there is no actual indication that changes in self-acceptance *preceded* the changed attitudes toward others, such an interpretation remains only one of the possible explanations. Stock (54), in her parallel study of the feelings that these same clients had toward themselves and toward others, made some attempt at analyzing which change came first. She confirmed Scheerer's findings of the positive relationship between self and other attitudes, and attempted to determine causality by correlating the feelings about *self* in one session with the feelings about *others* in the following session, as well as by correlating the feelings concerning *others* in one session with the feelings about *self* in the next. Neither of the two approaches yielded significant correlations, which is not very surprising considering that only 10 cases were used.

(b) Phillips (44), using the clients' statements reflecting attitudes toward self and others discussed in Scheerer's study (49), constructed a 50-item scale to measure self-acceptance and acceptance of others. He administered this scale to several groups, and found significant

positive correlations between the two attitudes. Berger (3) studied the relationship between self-acceptance and acceptance of others in a variety of groups (e.g., college students, prisoners, stutterers), and found positive relationships within each of them. McIntyre (37) administered Phillips' scale to a large group of male dormitory students, and then obtained sociometric ratings from each of them. He confirmed Phillips' findings about the positive relationship between acceptance of self and acceptance of others. However, no relationship was found between the *objective* acceptance *by* others (as measured by the sociometric ratings) and either the acceptance of self or the acceptance of others.

Lehner (30) attempted to study the relationship between perceptions of self and others by asking a group of college students to take the California Test of Personality under two conditions: as it would apply to themselves, and as it would apply to the "average person." Although he found a significant positive relationship between the two scores, subjects consistently obtained higher adjustment scores for themselves. As Kimber (29) has discovered, the California Test of Personality can be readily faked, and one should seriously question if Lehner was truly getting a measure of adjustment. Lehner (31) later extended the study by obtaining *ratings* of self and average person as to level of adjustment. The results confirmed the earlier study—though there was a relationship between the two ratings, the subjects rated themselves as being better adjusted. Interestingly enough, Lehner interprets his findings as reflecting an "I-high, you-low" attitude.

A study by Sarnoff (48) of some personality characteristics of anti-Semitic Jews, offers some indirect evidence on the relationship between self- and other-attitudes. Jewish subjects who scored high on an anti-Semitism scale tended to have more negative attitudes toward themselves than those who scored low.

There have been several other studies of the relationship between attitudes toward self and others (15, 20, 34, 40, 47, 63), but as these were also concerned with the additional variable of psychological adjustment, they will be discussed in the following section.

Psychological Adjustment and Attitudes toward Others

Adler believed that the depreciation tendency was characteristic of the neurotic style of alleviating feelings of inferiority (2). Consequently, studies of the relationship between psychological adjust-

ment and attitudes toward other people are relevant. These studies typically have either (a) correlated some measure of maladjustment with attitudes toward self and toward others (5, 15, 20), or (b) compared neurotics with normal subjects as to their attitudes toward others (23, 34, 47, 49, 54, 58, 63).

(a) Fey (20), on the basis of a questionnaire, classified individuals into one of four categories: high self-acceptance and high acceptance of others, high self-acceptance but low acceptance of others, low self-acceptance but high acceptance of others, and low self-acceptance and low acceptance of others. He found that the last category showed the most indications of insecurity (as revealed by the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, the F-scale, and the Bills' adjectives). Bossom and Maslow (5) measured acceptance of others more concretely by having subjects give their first impressions of how warm or cold they felt people were who were depicted in a series of photographs. The subjects had been divided into high and low scorers on the Maslow test for security (36). The results indicated that the more secure subjects rated the people in the photos as being warmer, and the less secure subjects rated these same people as being colder.

Attitudes toward others were related even more closely to actual behavior in a study by Crandall and Bellugi (15). After assessing adjustment by means of Rotter's Incomplete Sentence Test, they asked their subjects to rate themselves on a series of descriptive trait adjectives. Then, a person who was a stranger to everyone in the room, was interviewed briefly in front of the subjects. The interview was conducted so as to reveal little of his personality. The subjects were then asked to rate this stranger on the series of adjectives. The results showed that level of self-evaluation was positively related not only to level of adjustment, but to level of evaluation of the stranger as well.

(b) Scheerer's (49) and Stock's (54) investigations discussed above, reported an increase in clients' level of acceptance of others (and self) as a function of therapy. A later study by Rudikoff (47), which similarly used clients in therapy as their own control, also found this general improvement in self-concept and in attitudes toward others. Unfortunately, Rudikoff's findings were based on only eight cases. As part of this same therapy research program, Gordon and Cartwright (23) were interested in the changes in attitudes toward others (particularly authoritarianism) that would result from successful as compared with unsuccessful therapy. Their findings revealed only nonsignificant "trends" to suggest that successful cases became

more accepting of others (i.e., less authoritarian), while unsuccessful cases became less accepting, or more authoritarian.

Instead of using each subject as his own control, Luria (34) had neurotics (patients in therapy) and normal subjects rate a variety of concepts in the semantic differential (42). She found that neurotics tended to rate the concepts "me," "my mother", and "my father," the only person concepts included in the ratings, more negatively than did the normal subjects. Luria concluded that "devaluation of self *and* parents may well be diagnostic of people in trouble" (p. 219). As pointed out elsewhere (21), Luria's findings probably reflect the more general tendency of neurotics to devalue people in general.

Wahler (58) investigated neurotics (patients in a VA clinic) and normals as to their aggressive tendencies. The subjects were presented with scrambled words and were instructed to discard one word and construct a sentence. Depending on the word omitted, the sentence could be made to be either hostile or neutral. Further, the hostile sentences involved either human or nonhuman objects (e.g., animals, plants). Wahler found no difference between the normals and neurotics in hostile statements involving nonhuman objects. On those items in which people were involved, however, neurotic subjects made significantly more hostile sentences. These results seem to confirm the finding of Luria that neurotics' devaluations are directed toward people, but not toward nonhuman concepts.

In a study of the acceptance of self, parents, and people in general, Zuckerman, Baer, and Monashkin (63) compared the adjective ratings of normals and psychiatric patients (both neurotics and psychotics). They found that patients were less accepting of self and of others, and that acceptance of others was significantly related to independent ratings of adjustment based on their case histories. That is, the more poorly adjusted patients were less accepting of people in general. Another of their findings seems to confirm Goldfried's (21) interpretation of Luria's (34) study: acceptance of one's parents was correlated with acceptance of *people in general*, and this relationship was true for normals as well as for patients.

One final study might be mentioned here. Monro (40) recently obtained ratings on 32 self-referent attitudes (e.g., conceited, defensive, extrapunitive) from a group of neurotics and "inadequate" personalities. After correlating each trait with every other trait, Monro arrived at 22 clusters which overlapped to form two nuclei. One nucleus seemed to refer to the devaluation of self, and the other

to the rejection of other people's devaluations. "Their attitudes to others are demonstrably more critical and fault-finding than their attitudes to themselves" (p. 44). Though this finding is consistent with Adler's concept of the depreciation tendency in neurotics, one might question Monro's original selection of trait items, the impressionistic way in which the nuclei were arrived at, and the absence of a normal control group.

Methodological Deficiencies and Problems in Self-Concept Research

Most of the studies reviewed thus far were not discussed in terms of their methodological weaknesses. This was done to facilitate their presentation, and not because their findings are unquestionably accurate. The weaknesses have been discussed by several others (10, 16, 33, 55, 60). In fact, Lowe (33) has become so discouraged with the methodological difficulties that he retreats to the position that the self-concept is merely an artifact. Though the present writer does not agree with Lowe's final conclusion, obviously much of the research on self-concept cannot be taken at face value.

To begin with, a recent tally (55) has shown that studies have varied considerably in the way they attempted to measure self-concept. Some 15 different approaches have been used, and new measures are being continually devised. With this comes the problem of the *selection of items* used in the inventories or the ratings (16). Unless the sampling of items is representative, a very limited or biased measure of self will be achieved. This difficulty becomes compounded in light of Loehlin's (32) recent findings that the connotative meaning of self-descriptive adjectives varies from person to person. Thus, one person might rate himself as being shy according to what *his conception* of shyness implies, while another person, based on another conception of shyness, might indicate that he was not shy.

A serious shortcoming of most measures of attitudes toward self and others is the effect of *social desirability*. Thus, Cowen and Tongas (14) found that when a person indicates that he, as well as other people have certain characteristics, he may do so not because he actually feels this is so, but rather because he believes this is the socially desirable thing to say. Consequently, much of the research which finds a positive relationship between attitudes toward self and attitudes toward others might merely be revealing the individual's consistency in making socially desirable ratings. In Wahler's (58) study comparing normals and neurotics as to their aggressive tendencies, however, the social desirability variable was controlled. He found

that regardless of the social desirability values of the unscrambled sentences, neurotics consistently constructed more hostile sentences.

In addition to the effects of social desirability, research on self- and other-attitudes is also confounded by *response styles* (60). Thus, certain individuals tend to respond "yes" and others "no" to items in a questionnaire, irrespective of what the content of the item might be (12). Or, if the inventory involves ratings, there will be individual variations in the tendencies to use various points on the scale (42). It is possible, then, to interpret an obtained positive relationship between ratings of self and of others as actually revealing the consistency of response styles.

It is necessary to eliminate the confounding variables of social desirability and response styles. Perhaps one approach might be a forced-choice inventory. In one such recent study (13) the trait descriptive adjective pair was matched according to social desirability. Yet this did not completely eliminate the effects of social desirability. Though great pains were taken in pairing adjectives according to their social desirability ratings, it was found that the social desirability value of these adjectives changed as a function of being presented in a pair, and consequently were no longer evenly matched.

One more caution on the social desirability variable. In studies which made use of ratings of clients in therapy (e.g., 23, 34, 47, 49, 54), one might anticipate that the subjects would be additionally influenced by the way in which they felt their therapists might want them to respond. In such studies the dimension of "therapist desirability" would be something to control for.

Most of the studies reviewed thus far have been correlational in nature. By their very experimental design they could not offer unambiguous data as to which variable was antecedent to the other. They were reviewed to find confirmation for Adler's concept of the depreciation tendency. But as the depreciation of others presumably stems from feelings of inadequacy, research bearing on this relationship should ideally be so designed as to allow for the unambiguous interpretation that attitudes toward self were antecedent to attitudes toward others. Though Stock's study (54) was correlational, she attempted to explore this problem by noting which attitudes changed first as the result of therapy; she was not very successful.

Experimental Attempts at Changing Perception of Self and Others

In order to arrive at a better understanding of which is antecedent in the relationship between self- and other-attitudes, the experimenter

must actively manipulate one of the relevant variables. Unfortunately, few such studies have been done. To note their results and to provide some general guidelines for future research, these studies are discussed below. They typically involved the induction of some sort of failure, or rejection by others (17, 26, 43).

Horowitz (26) placed subjects in small group situations in which, by voting, they were given the "social power" to determine the course of the leader's instruction. Variation in power was reflected in the extent to which their votes were weighted in making the final decision. The group leader, who in some groups had more but in other groups less power than the rest of the group, was the one who counted the votes and made the final decision. Consequently, it was possible to reduce the subjects' expected power or "adequacy" by simply having the leader make a decision which did not take into account the proper weighting of the individuals' votes. As the leader reduced the subject's power, hostility toward the leader increased. This hostility could not be accounted for by the mere frustration of the subjects' desires, as hostility did not increase among those individuals who were legitimately outvoted by the leader. Further confirmation of the relationship between "inadequacy" and hostility comes from the finding that by experimentally restoring power to subjects, hostility was reduced.

Pepitone and Wilpizeski (43) hypothesized that when an individual is rejected by others, he will experience "devaluation anxiety." When he is unable to reduce this anxiety adaptively, he will attempt to attribute responsibility for this rejection. If he believes the rejection was justified, he will depreciate himself; otherwise he will express hostility toward the rejector. To test these hypotheses, the subjects were placed in three-person discussion groups in which two of the members were confederates. The two confederates rejected the subjects in the experimental group (i.e. by ignoring him, answering him curtly, etc.) but not in the control group. Contrary to the original hypothesis that rejection would result in either self-depreciation or hostility toward others, it was found that rejection resulted in *both* attitudes. Rejected subjects thought less of *both* themselves and the other members than did non-rejected subjects, and additionally devalued their own as well as the other members' opinions. Irrespective of level of depreciation, there was also a positive correlation between self-depreciation and depreciation of others within both the rejected and nonrejected groups.

Diller (17) studied changes in attitudes toward self and others, as the result of experimentally-induced "success" or "failure" on an IQ test. Attitudes toward others (close friends, ordinary friends, casual acquaintances) were measured by ratings, as were *overt* attitudes toward self. *Covert* attitudes toward self were obtained by having the individual unwittingly rate a sample of his own handwriting together with many other handwriting samples. As a result of failure, no changes occurred in overt self-ratings, but there was a significant decrease in covert ratings of self; there were no changes in ratings of others. After the success experience, both overt self-ratings and ratings of others increased.

Though these studies show promise for the possibility to manipulate experimentally attitudes toward self and others, the question arises as to just how closely these immediate and probably temporary attitudes reflect the relationship between the more ingrained feelings of inadequacy (i.e. inferiority complex) and the more pervasive and chronic tendency to depreciate others. One might speculate that the stronger the underlying feelings of inferiority, the easier it would be to induce experimentally a transitory feeling of failure and inadequacy. Similarly, the stronger the long-term tendency to depreciate others, the greater the likelihood that this derogatory reaction will be evoked in an experimental situation.

One further point on the interpretation of these findings. Where the induction of negative feelings about self resulted in increased negative and deprecatory attitudes toward others (26, 43) the objects of the deprecatory feelings were those people who had been the source of the rejection. Diller (17), failed to find changes in the subjects' attitudes toward friends probably because the friends were not associated with the source of the failure. In other words, the findings of Horowitz (26) and Pepitone and Wilpizeski (43) might actually reflect retaliatory efforts of the subjects. As will be discussed below, this might well represent an important aspect of the development of the depreciation tendency. In light of this possibility, it might be worthwhile to extend these studies to see just how far beyond the source of threat or rejection this depreciation of others extends.

THEORETICAL REFORMULATION

As the result of the research findings discussed thus far, as well as recent theoretical discussions in such areas as self-concept, person perception, projection, and attitude formation, it appears that a

closer theoretical look at the concept of depreciation tendency is needed.

Inferiority Feelings and the Distinction between Self and Ego

When Adler states that the depreciation of others originates from the individual's attempt to improve his conception of himself, two closely related questions come to mind: (a) Does Adler refer to self-concept as an *experiential* state, or as a *motivator* of behavior? (b) Can the individual actually improve his conception of himself by depreciating those around him?

(a) To look toward Adler for the answer to the first question does not prove to be too successful. Adler frequently refers to feelings of inferiority from a very definite phenomenological point of view. Yet despite this emphasis on ego psychology and consciousness, Adler indicates that the person, in trying to escape from his feelings of inferiority, may not even be aware of them. Thus, Adler acknowledges: "It is not surprising, therefore, that we often receive a negative reply when we ask a person whether he has a feeling of inferiority" (2, p. 119). In order to ascertain whether or not behavior is motivated from inferiority feelings which are not in the individual's conscious awareness, it would seem more appropriate to *infer* these feelings by observing the person's general orientation to life.

In reformulating Adler's hypotheses about attitudes toward self, it might be helpful here to conceptualize two aspects of self-concept: a *phenomenological* aspect, and a *motivational* aspect. In his critical evaluation of research on the self-concept, Lowe (33) has made the point that many of these studies have never really specified on which of the many possible conceptualizations of self the research has been based. Lowe discusses no less than six of these implicit conceptualizations of self. All of these uses, however, can be reduced to the *phenomenological aspect of self* (e.g. knowing self, experiencing self, and cultural identification) and the *motivational aspect of self* (self as motivator, organizer, and adjuster).⁴

This distinction between the more changeable, experiential aspects *self* and the more stable, need, motivational *ego* system has been discussed at length by Chein (8) and Symonds (56). Hilgard (25) has

⁴In presenting Adler's concept of inferiority complex, Ansbacher and Ansbacher also saw the necessity of adding a further distinction. They differentiated between "inferiority *symptom* complex," and "inferiority *feeling* complex" (2, pp. 256-259). The first would belong to the phenomenological aspect of self, the second, to the motivational aspect of self.—Ed. note.

similarly suggested that the complete understanding of self-concept must account not only for those aspects of self which can be gained from the individual's conscious awareness, but also for those characteristics of self which must be *inferred* from the individual's observable behavior. The importance of conceptualizing self from these two points of view has repeatedly been emphasized (11, 16, 52). Hilgard (25) has argued that the inferred self is particularly important in that it involves the individual's patterning of motives and persistent attitudes. In other words, the inferred self corresponds to what we have referred to as the *motivational* aspect of self.

As an aside, one might note that previous theoretical discussions on the distinctions between self and ego frequently have created confusion where confusion need not have occurred. A good deal of misunderstanding seems to have resulted from the reification of concepts. Though most theorists would deny any "homunculus" connotations to their conceptions of self and ego, discussions of these concepts frequently have sounded *as if* they were talking about *things*. For example, Chein in attempting to draw the distinction between the motivational conception of ego and the experiential conception of self, states that investigations of the ego "have thrown a good deal of light on the working of *this something*. Yet, *what* is this mysterious something which works in these diverse ways" (8, p. 313)? [italics mine]. Hilgard has similarly leaned toward reification when he suggests that we may "look for *the self* in awareness, to see if we can find by direct observation *the self* that is anxious, that *feels guilty*, that *tries* various dodges in order to maintain self-respect" (25, p. 337) [italics mine]. And, in the early edition of their book, Snygg and Combs state: "A self threatened by its perceptions may deny the perceptions by simply refusing to enter the situation where such a perception is forced upon him" (53, p. 148). Here the authors not only imply the workings of an homunculus, but interchangeably refer to self as experiencer, motivator, and actor. This confusion was subsequently noted (10), however, and their description of self modified somewhat in the later edition of their book (9).

These tendencies toward reification may very well have contributed to the many different conceptualizations of "the" self which are discussed by Lowe (33). The self-concept has been treated theoretically as if it were a hypothetical construct (35), and the surplus meaning consequently has varied from theorist to theorist. Self-concept might more appropriately be conceptualized as a useful ab-

straction obtained from either the phenomenological report of the individual, or from the observation of his overt behavior.

(b) Does a person actually change his feelings of inferiority by depreciating others? In answering this question, one obviously must revert back to our distinction between phenomenological and motivational aspects of self. When an individual engages in certain behaviors such as the depreciation of others, these are directed by certain motivational processes (i.e. inferred self or ego processes) for the purpose of keeping the person from consciously experiencing feelings of inferiority. Though it is unlikely that a person will change these motivational processes by depreciating others, it is possible that this behavior will be effective in altering the individual's more transitory phenomenological state as he evaluates himself relatively.

Whether or not the individual is successful in alleviating these experienced feelings of inferiority might depend on the strength of these feelings, as well as his skill in depreciating others. Perhaps another important variable is the *effect* this depreciation has on others. Thus, if those other people who have been depreciated react negatively to the depreciator, this might only serve to further reinforce the individual's negative conception of himself.

A recent study by Iverson and Haug (27) bears directly on this last point. They studied experimentally the effects of both a speaker's status and his expression of hostility (extrapunitive, i.e. depreciation of the listener; intrapunitive; and impunitive) on the listeners' evaluations through ratings of him. Iverson and Haug found that depending upon the perceived status of the speaker, listeners evaluated the speaker very differently. When listeners thought the depreciating speaker was of low status, they tended to *devalue* him. However, when they thought he was of high status they tended to evaluate him *positively*. A typical side-comment made about the low-status depreciator was, "he doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows." The high-status depreciator, on the other hand, was seen as "making his talk lively and interesting."

These findings have some interesting implications for the effectiveness of the depreciation tendency. If a neurotic depreciates people who see him as being of high status, then his depreciation may actually result in increased evaluation from these people and could facilitate the immediate alleviation of his inferiority feelings. If the neurotic depreciates people who see him as being of low status, then his negative evaluations of them would perpetuate a vicious and maladaptive

cycle of feelings of inferiority and the depreciation of others. This aspect of the effects of depreciation certainly merits further investigation.

Projection and Attitudes toward Others

Any attempt to explain why an individual maintains certain attitudes toward other people must take cognizance of what, back in 1924, F. H. Allport called "social projection." By this he simply meant that people tend to attribute their own attitudes and feelings to others. This differs slightly from the traditional psychoanalytic concept of projection, which implies that the projected attitudes and feelings are those which are unacceptable to the individual.

Sears (50), in his classic study, adopted the psychoanalytic concept of projection and investigated it as a function of insight into one's own personality traits. His subjects rated themselves and their fraternity brothers on such traits as stinginess, disorderliness, bashfulness, etc. "Insight" was defined according to the discrepancy between the way the individual rated himself and the way he was rated by his fraternity brothers. Sears found that individuals who lacked insight about the possession of an undesirable trait indeed tended to attribute this trait to others.

Berkowitz (4) has more recently reinterpreted the projection of unacceptable attitudes to others as an instance of a more general *contrast* effect. The contrast is believed to occur between the individual's phenomenological self-attitudes and his evaluation of others. For example, if a person's inadequate self-concept is only inferred from ratings of friends, but he does not have insight into these feelings, then his conscious self-attitudes will be that he is an adequate person. By contrast to his conscious feelings of adequacy, then, this individual will tend to see other people as being less than adequate. This interpretation might best be modified by the findings of Goldings (22), which seem to indicate that the contrast effect occurs only when an individual's conscious self-attitudes are extreme. Thus, if a person had very little insight into his underlying feelings of inferiority, then his conscious, very superior attitudes would cause him to depreciate others by contrast. Individuals whose attitudes are less extreme will be more likely to manifest *supplementary* projection and see others as being much like themselves (22).

Though this interpretation of the basis of attitudes toward others is certainly a plausible one, there is still the very knotty problem of which attitude is antecedent to the other. Are one's attitudes toward

others based on comparing them to oneself, as Berkowitz (4) and Goldings (22) hypothesize? Or does an individual evaluate himself relative to the way in which he sees others (2)? Or is this distinction really an artificial one? Perhaps the next section will help to clarify matters.

Development of Self and the Concept of "Projected Self"

To gain a more complete understanding of the relationship between self-concept and one's attitudes toward others in general, as well as between inferiority and depreciation in specific, it is important to take into consideration how attitudes toward self develop. The reason is that these attitudes toward self are based on the reactions of others.

G. H. Mead, whose conceptualizations are frequently mentioned but infrequently used by psychologists, has described at length how self-concept originates. He begins by posing the question: "How can an individual get outside of himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself" (38, p. 138)? From this point of departure, Mead reasons that man cannot step outside of himself—at least cannot do so directly. The indirect way in which he is able to evaluate himself is by observing the reactions and attitudes of other people toward him. From these reactions of the "generalized other," the conception of self develops. From this formulation one might speculate that the individual also develops certain *expectations of how other people are going to react toward him*. These expectations may very well evolve into a conception of self that the individual projects onto the generalized other. We shall refer to this "attributed" conception of self as the *projected self*, and shall try to describe how this construct can theoretically mediate between the perception a person has of himself and the attitudes he holds toward others.⁵

In a variety of contexts, a number of studies (6, 7, 19, 28, 39, 51, 57, 59) have attempted to assess what corresponds to the projected self. The study most relevant to the point being made here is that by Tagiuri, Blake, and Bruner (57), who were interested in the relationship between the individual's projected self and his feelings about others. Their subjects had been participating in one of three 10-

⁵One might wonder how closely the projected self corresponds to the phenomenological self. Miyamoto and Dornbusch (39) report a positive relationship between the way an individual rates himself and the way he anticipates the "generalized other" will rate him. Unfortunately, their study is difficult to interpret in that the findings are confounded by the variables of social desirability and response styles.

member, quasi-therapy groups which met for 12 two-hour sessions. When approximately half-way through with the series of sessions, the subjects were asked to indicate whom in the group they "liked best" and "liked least," and whom they felt liked them best and least. One of the most interesting findings was that subjects held feelings about others which were congruent with their perceptions of how others felt about them. Thus, the subject tended to accept those people whom he felt accepted him, and rejected those whom he felt rejected him. The authors additionally found that whereas an individual could accurately identify feelings of acceptance directed toward him by others, his perception of being rejected did not necessarily correspond to actual rejection by others. These results partially confirm an earlier study by McIntyre (37) who found no relationship between acceptance or rejection of others and objective (i.e. sociometric) acceptance or rejection by others. A study in which one's acceptance of others was positively related to actual acceptance by peers used children as subjects (62). This leads one to wonder about the development of an "autistic," projected rejection by others, and the implications this might have for the neurotic depreciation of others.

Newcomb has made a point which is relevant here. In describing the persistence of negative attitudes toward others, he suggests, "the likelihood that a persistently hostile attitude will develop varies with the degree to which the perceived interpersonal relationship remains autistic, its privacy maintained by some sort of barriers to communication" (41, p. 199). Adler would attribute these "barriers" in communication to the neurotic's attitude of "distance" toward others, or his tendency to "exclude" any possible threats which might come from others (2, pp. 273-279). As the "generalized other" has represented a threat to the neurotic in the past (i.e. by reflecting his inadequacies back to him), rejection by others remains an ever-present possibility. Thus, implicit in Adler's observation that the neurotic typically lacks "social feeling" (2, pp. 250-255) is that he is deficient in empathic and role playing ability. By maintaining a private frame of reference, the neurotic perceives the "generalized other" as devaluating him, and then responds in kind. This has implications for a conceptualization of "insight" different from the one used by Sears (50). Sears defined insight according to lack of discrepancy between the way the individual consciously sees himself and the way others see him. But insight might be viewed by taking the concept of the projected self into consideration. Such a conceptualization of insight (61) would

involve lack of discrepancy between the way the individual *thinks* others see him and how they *actually* see him.

In considering the generality of the projected self as a useful explanatory concept, it would seem to be a more useful concept when involving the "generalized other" than when directed toward more "significant others." The evaluative standards of the generalized other are not always very clear, and projection of attitudes consequently should be facilitated. In the case of significant others the individual knows better how they feel about him and is less likely to distort their evaluation of him.⁶ Needless to say, depending upon how "private" the person's view of the world is, there is increasing room for individual variation within these two conditions.

As the *projected self* appears to be a useful concept in understanding the motivational system of the individual, one might speculate about the amount of overlap between it, the *phenomenological self*, and the *motivational self*. The projected self, like the phenomenological self, refers to attitudes and feelings about which the individual is consciously aware. On the other hand, the projected self is similar to the motivational self in that it seems to direct behavior. The amount of similarity involved in these various approaches to the conceptualization of self is a question in the need of future research.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Adler has hypothesized that characteristic of the neurotic attempt at alleviating intense feelings of inferiority is the tendency to depreciate others. By doing so, an individual is able to raise his own self-esteem by evaluating himself relative to those he has depreciated. This paper has reviewed research relevant to the depreciation tendency. Based on these research findings, as well as theoretical speculation in a number of related problem areas, a theoretical reformulation of the relationship between inferiority and depreciation has been presented.

Though there has been no research carried out specifically to test Adler's depreciation hypothesis, numerous studies have been done which are tangentially relevant to the depreciation tendency. Such research has consistently found: (a) in general, there is a positive relationship between one's attitudes toward self and one's attitudes

⁶This hypothesis might explain the different results obtained by Fey (20) and Williams (59). Fey, using medical students as subjects, found *no relationship* between projected acceptance and actual acceptance by others. Williams, who used more "significant" others (i.e., fraternity brothers), found that projected self *did* correspond closely to the actual attitudes of others.

toward others, and (b) individuals who are maladjusted tend to have more negative attitudes toward others.

Unfortunately, much of this research cannot be taken at face value, as the results are confounded by the variables of social desirability and response style. A further difficulty in these studies is that they typically are correlational, and one cannot determine whether attitudes toward self, attitudes toward others, and maladjustment are antecedent or consequent variables. A few studies which have manipulated experimentally attitudes toward self and others have found that when an individual is experimentally rejected or made to feel inferior, he tends to depreciate those individuals who were instrumental in inducing these feelings of inferiority.

In attempting to reformulate Adler's hypothesis about the relationship between feelings of inferiority and the depreciation of others, it is first necessary to distinguish between the *phenomenological* and *motivational* aspects of inferiority. By the phenomenological aspect of one's self-attitudes has been meant the conscious, less stable conceptions of self. The motivational aspect of self, on the other hand, has been used to conceptualize the more stable attitudes and need systems which motivate the individual to avoid certain conscious feelings—particularly feelings of inferiority.

In hypothesizing why an individual should maintain certain attitudes toward others, the concept of projection has been discussed, particularly as it was relevant to the way in which self-conceptions are believed to develop originally. By extending G. H. Mead's formulation that self-concept originates from the reflected reactions and attitudes of the "generalized other," the importance of the *projected self* has been noted. By the projected self is meant the person's perception of how the generalized other sees him. Thus, it is possible that an individual may hold a certain attitude toward others because of his perception of how others see him. The projected self is considered as being a particularly important conceptual mediator in the relationship between inferiority and depreciation. In the development of the neurotic's self-concept, the generalized other presumably reflected attitudes which indicated the neurotic's inadequacy. In adulthood, the neurotic does not clearly conceptualize this negative attitude he has of himself. This inadequate conception of himself nevertheless remains a sensitive area for him; from his own private view of the world, he will autistically project this conception of himself onto others and expect others to evaluate him negatively. His attitude toward the generalized other consequently becomes that of depreciation. From

this point of view, the tendency to depreciate others may be seen as being a retaliatory *tu quoque*, or a neurotic twist to the golden rule: "Do unto others as you see them do unto you."

By this depreciation of others, the neurotic additionally may temporarily raise his phenomenological evaluation of self by *dis-counting* this perceived rejection by others (i.e., "These rejections do not come from valid sources"), or by evaluating himself *relatively*, as Adler originally pointed out (i.e., "I am much better than they are"). There is also the possibility that the depreciation of others, though motivated by the desire to keep from feeling inadequate, does not change the individual's evaluation of himself but rather makes it easier for him to tolerate his inferior projected self-concept. This would be a "misery-loves-company" interpretation of the effect of depreciation.

Another way of interpreting the depreciation tendency might make use of Erikson's (18) concept of "negative identity." According to Erikson, the individual who adopts a negative identity, rejects and is hostile toward the roles which are available to him. Such an attitude would be much like that of Salinger's Holden Caulfield, for whom the world and everybody in it was "phony." In a way, adopting a negative identity can help a person to find a secure position in the world. Rather than being a "not-quite-somebody," such a person develops what essentially is a reactive orientation, in which he is the critic and counter-puncher. Looking at it from another point of view, the individual with a negative identity may be attempting to maintain the position of being "up" by putting all other people "down."

These various interpretations of the reasons for and effects of depreciation are by no means mutually exclusive. They undoubtedly do not include all the alternatives that might possibly be formulated.

In the final analysis, however, our understanding of the depreciation tendency must be substantiated by research. Not just research per se, but well-designed, adequately-controlled research, whose main purpose is to investigate the relationship between inferiority, the projected self-image, and the tendency to depreciate others. Some of the specific questions concerning this relationship which seem to merit future investigation are the following:

1. How is the discrepancy between projected self-image and actual evaluation of the generalized other related to the tendency to depreciate others?
2. How does the projected self-image differ when it is attributed to close friends, casual acquaintances, and strangers?

3. How much overlap is there among the phenomenological, motivational, and projected conceptualizations of self-concept?
4. Is intensity of inferiority feelings the only significant antecedent condition for the development of the depreciation tendency?
5. What is the relationship between long-term, underlying inferiority feelings, and transitory feelings of inferiority which are relatively easily induced experimentally? Similarly, what is the relationship between chronic derogatory attitudes, and the easily evoked experimental depreciation?
6. Does the tendency to depreciate others occur in thought only, or is it communicated openly?
7. If depreciation is openly expressed to others, what characteristics and reactions of these others, determine the effectiveness of the depreciation?
8. Does the depreciation of others actually raise one's conscious self-esteem, or does it just make it easier to tolerate one's own negative self-concept?

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