

THE DISTURBED CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF HIS PARENTS¹

LESLIE Y. RABKIN

University of Washington, School of Medicine

The numerous studies of the normal child's conception of parental roles have been in agreement that father, in relation to mother, is perceived as more fearsome, punitive, and dominant, and less nurturant (3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10). But despite ample evidence that the family roles and general family environment of the disturbed child are deviant and distorted, the perceptions of these children have not yet been systematically explored. This study is an examination of certain of these perceptions, particularly in the areas of parental nurturance, competence, punitiveness, and power.

METHOD

Subjects

Our subjects were 21 schizophrenic and 21 neurotic boys, and 24 boys with behavior disorders (mean ages, respectively, 10 years, 4 months; 9 years, 10 months; and 10 years, 3 months); and a comparison group of 32 normal boys examined by Kagan and Lemkin (10) and 16 boys examined by the author, 48 in all. There were no significant differences in response between our subjects and those of Kagan and Lemkin. All groups did not differ significantly in age, socio-economic status, or religion. The boys were all under fourteen years, white, and came from intact homes. Each was tested individually by the author, except those from the Kagan and Lemkin study.

Test Materials

Three sets of questions, devised by Kagan and Lemkin (10), were administered: indirect questions, indirect pictures (with which the present study is not concerned), and direct questions.

Indirect questions. The boys were first shown two drawings, one of a man and one of a woman, and told: "Here are pictures of a mother and a father. They have a boy of their own. Which one is the mother? Which one is the father? Now I'm going to ask you some questions about *this* mother and father, and I want you to point to the one you think." The questions were:

1. Who is the strongest one?
2. Who gives the boy the most presents?
3. Who spansks the most?
4. Who is the boss at home?
5. Whom does the boy like the best?
6. Who gets mad at the boy?
7. Who is the smartest?
8. If the boy did something bad and both mother and father were home,
 9. Who would punish the boy?
 10. Who is nicer to the boy?
 11. Whom is the boy more scared of?
 12. Who tells the boy what to do all the time?
 13. Who kisses the boy the most?
 14. Whom would the boy like to grow up to be, whom would the boy want to be like when he grows up?

Direct questions. After the boy responded to the indirect pictures (not included in the present report), he was again asked the 13 questions. But this time they referred to the boy himself and his own parents. He was told, "Now I'm going to ask you some questions about *your* mother and father," and the questions were rephrased such as, "Whom are you more scared of, your mother or your father?"

RESULTS

The three disturbed groups were compared with the normal groups in two ways: regarding single questions, and regarding mean scores on clusters of questions of similar content. There were three such clusters (interitem correlations among these questions were all positive and justified this merging): punitiveness-hostility (Questions 3, 8, and 10); nurturance-affection (Questions 2, 9, and 12); and competence-power (Questions 1, 4 and 7). Scores for each cluster could range from 0 to 3 and thus provide a measure of the intensity of a perceived parental role behavior.

The results are shown in Table 1, where all the significant differences that were found between the three disturbed groups and the normal boys are entered. Only differences significant at the .05 level or beyond (two-tailed test) are reported.

Schizophrenics versus normals. Table 1 shows that more schizophrenic boys saw their mothers as the stronger and smarter parent and as the boss in the family, and father as the giver of presents, than did normal boys. In addition, more schizophrenic boys wanted to grow up to be like their mothers, i.e. identified with her, than did normal boys.

In the question clusters, schizophrenic boys reported mother as more competent and punitive, and father as more nurturant, than did normal boys.

Neurotics versus normals. Table 1 also shows that more neurotic boys liked father better and saw him as the giver of presents, although they judged him more often as the one who spansks and gets mad at the boy than did normal subjects. The neurotics also saw father more often as the boss of the house. But like the schizophrenics, they expressed more often the wish to grow up to be like their mothers.

The clusters of questions show only that neurotic boys saw father as more nurturant than did normal boys. This last result agrees with those of Silverman et al. (12) who found maternal deprivation, particularly in the area of nurturant activities, to be a predominant trait in the families of children with neurotic reading disabilities.

TABLE I. PARENT NAMED SIGNIFICANTLY MORE OFTEN BY DISTURBED BOYS THAN BY NORMAL BOYS AS POSSESSING CERTAIN ATTRIBUTES*

Parent Attribute	Schizophrenic vs. normal		Neurotic vs. normal		Behavior disorder vs. normal	
	Indirect questions	Direct questions	Indirect questions	Direct questions	Indirect questions	Direct questions
Competent cluster	mother	mother	—	—	—	mother
1. is stronger	—	mother	—	—	—	—
4. bosses	—	mother	—	father	—	—
7. is smarter	mother	mother	—	—	mother	—
Nurturant cluster	father	father	father	father	—	—
2. gives presents	father	father	father	—	father	—
9. is nicer	—	—	—	—	mother	—
12. kisses	—	—	—	—	—	—
Punitive cluster	mother	—	—	—	—	father
3. spansks	—	—	father	—	—	father
8. punishes	—	—	—	—	—	—
10. scares	—	—	—	—	father	father
Various	—	—	—	—	—	—
5. is liked	—	—	father	—	mother	mother
6. gets mad	—	—	father	—	father	—
11. tells him	—	—	—	—	father	—
13. identification object	—	mother	—	mother	—	mother

*Differences significant at or beyond .05 level.

Behavior disorders versus normals. Finally we see from Table 1 that more boys with behavior disorders than normal boys perceived father as the parent who more often than mother spansks and gets mad, of whom the boy is scared and who tells him what to do. Unexpectedly, the father was also seen as the giver of presents. Mother, on the other hand, was more often seen as the nicer and smarter, and as the better liked parent. More behavior-disorder boys, like the schizophrenics and neurotics, desired to grow up to be like mother.

According to the clusters of questions, mother is perceived as more competent and father as more punitive among the behavior-disorder boys.

DISCUSSION

Schizophrenic Boys

Many patterns of parent-child interaction have been put forth as "schizophrenogenic," the most common being that of an overtly or covertly rejecting and dominating mother whose chief weapon is over-protectiveness, by means of which she keeps the child enveloped in her "smother love," allowing him no chance for individuation (11). The findings presented here tend to parallel the pattern of a dominating, punitive, non-nurturant mother. This picture clearly emerged in the cluster where schizophrenics labeled mother as more competent and punitive and father as more nurturant than did normals.

The boy's perception of mother as dominant and punitive and father as nurturant, emerged also in some qualitative data gathered in the course of examining each boy. At the end of the formal testing, the boy was asked for his social stereotypes of mother and father—"What do daddies do?" and "What do mommies do?" The normal boys unanimously responded with such maternal role conceptions as "washes the dishes," "cleans the house," and "makes me lunch," and paternal role conceptions like "works," "fixes things around the house," and "helps me."

The schizophrenic boys, however, were not nearly so clear-cut in their differentiations. Forty percent of the boys said that mother engaged in some punitive or overpossessive and dominating act. One boy, for example, answered, "Mothers tell you what's right and wrong . . . she picks out your clothes till you want to and then still has a hand in that too." Another stated, "She spansks you if you're bad . . . but doesn't fix things." Thirty percent of the boys did not mention father's working role, but noted instead his passivity, or

engagement in more feminine activities. Such as father "plays games," "buys food," or "just lies on the couch and doesn't do anything."

Neurotic Boys

Our findings suggest that the mother-son relationship might be an important source of difficulty also for the neurotic boy. Mother was not perceived as often or as much nurturant by these boys than by normal boys. In addition, the neurotic boys saw father as more nurturant than did normals.

This family role confusion, with a less nurturant mother and a more nurturant father is like the pattern observed in the schizophrenic boy's families. That there is a common ground of distortion in the families of these two groups has also been suggested by Fisher et al. (6) and by Block et al. (2). Utilizing a wide variety of projective and interview devices, they were not able to differentiate clearly between the parents of neurotics and schizophrenics.

However, when we compare our cluster results, we find that the neurotics perceived less maternal punitiveness and competence than the schizophrenics although the responses of both groups were in a similar direction.

Thus, the neurotics appeared to perceive father as more assertive and competent than did the schizophrenics. Perhaps a key variable in the differing degree of disturbance of these two groups lies in the fact that the neurotic boys' fathers are more like those of normal boys and therefore are reasonably good identification figures. The schizophrenic boys are confronted with more of a family role reversal, with mother dominant and father passive, making a masculine identification more difficult.

Behavior Disorder Boys

These boys saw mother more often than father in a benign, nurturing role, with father appearing as a dominating ogre and the main agent of punishment. This family portrait is similar to that of the aggressive child found recently by Andry (1), in which delinquent children saw their relationship with father as being most inadequate; that their mothers loved them most, while their fathers were more distant and unrewarding and not clearly the effective leader of the family. That is, while father was recognized as the titular head of the family, he was obeyed least and often rebelled against.

In our study, too, the children saw father as the head of the household and the controlling parent, but in comparison to normal boys,

saw him as far less competent and as far more punitive. Fear of father appeared to be an important aspect of the behavior-disorder boys' perceptions.

Common Ground

The three groups of disturbed boys have in common that in direct questioning they all wanted to grow up to be like mother more than normal boys do. But the reasons for such identification with the mother would seem, on the basis of our results, to vary for the three groups. The schizophrenics may identify with the mother because she is seen as more competent and as the boss. In the neurotics the reason for the mother identification is not readily apparent. In the behavior disorder group the mother identification could be attributed to the unfavorable perception of the father.

A second response common to the three groups is that in indirect questioning the father is more often seen as giving presents than is the case among normal boys. The reason for this is not really evident from our data.

SUMMARY

Three groups of disturbed boys, 21 schizophrenics, 21 neurotics, and 24 behavior disorders, were examined about their perceptions of parental roles, as were 48 normal boys. Both direct and indirect methods of questioning were used.

The main differences between the groups were that in comparison with normal boys (*a*) schizophrenic boys saw mother significantly more often as dominant and punitive, and father engaged in passive or feminine activities; (*b*) neurotic boys saw significantly more often paternal nurturance and at the same time father as boss; (*c*) behavior-disorder boys saw father significantly more often as punitive and hostile, and mother as nicer.

The boys of all three groups compared to normal boys had in common that they wanted more often to grow up to be like mother, and perceived fathers in general more often as giving presents.

These results were discussed and compared with the findings of other studies.

REFERENCES

1. ANDRY, R. G. *Delinquency and parental pathology*. London: Methuen, 1960.
2. BLOCK, JEANNE, PATTERSON, VIRGINIA, BLOCK, J., & JACKSON, D. D. A study of the parents of schizophrenic and neurotic children. *Psychiatry*, 1958, 21, 387-397.

3. CAVA, ESTHER L., & RAUSH, H. L. Identification and the adolescent boy's perception of his father. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1952, 47, 855-856.
4. EMMERICH, W. Young children's discriminations of parent and child roles. *Child Developm.*, 1959, 30, 404-420.
5. FINCH, HELEN M. Young children's concept of parent roles. *J. Home Econ.*, 1955, 47, 99-103.
6. FISHER, S., BOYD, INA, WALKER, D., & SHEER, DIANNE. Parents of schizophrenics, neurotics, and normals. *AMA Arch. gen. Psychiat.*, 1959, 1, 149-166.
7. FUNKENSTEIN, D. H., KING, S. H., & DROLETTE, M. E. Perception of parents and social attitudes. Paper read at Amer. Psychopath. Soc., June, 1955.
8. GARDNER, PEARL L. An analysis of children's attitudes toward fathers. *J. genet. Psychol.*, 1947, 70, 3-28.
9. KAGAN, J. The child's perception of the parent. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1956, 53, 257-258.
10. KAGAN, J., & LEMKIN, JUDITH. The child's differential perception of parental attributes. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1960, 61, 440-447.
11. McCORD, W., PORTA, JUDITH, & McCORD, JOAN. The familial genesis of psychoses. *Psychiatry*, 1962, 25, 60-71.
12. SILVERMAN, J. S., FITE, MARGARETTA W., & MOSHER, MARGARET M. Clinical findings in reading disability children — special cases of intellectual inhibition. *Amer. J. Orthopsychiat.*, 1959, 29, 298-314.