

## CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE MEMORIES AND ANOMIE IN ADULTS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The anomic individual is defined as one who perceives society as normless, social structure as useless, and who withdraws from society. In a theoretical note Ansbacher (2) talks of anomie as essentially synonymous with the Adlerian concept of lack of social interest (1). Much psychological and sociological theorizing and research view the two concepts as closely interrelated. For Merton (7) faulty social structure and internalization of social norms are prime sources of anomie. MacIver (5) speaks of the anomic as an individual who is incapable to adjust to cultural norms and work for the common social interest. Nettler (8) reports a close relationship between anomie and alienation. Reimanis and Davol (11) in a study of correlates of anomie, found that lack of desire for social affiliation was the best predictor of anomie in a multiple correlation analysis. More recently, McClosky and Schaar (6) interpreted their research results as suggesting that anomie is a sign of impaired socialization.

Davol and Reimanis (4) considered that anomie could be interpreted using the Adlerian concept of lack of social interest, and suggested that a potentially fruitful method of study would be to examine the concept of anomie as a developing process. An exploratory study (10), using experience memories of older domiciliated veterans (median age 66 years) lent some support to the notion that the roots of anomie begin early in life. Adler (3, p. 373) has stated that in the process of developing social interest, identification with parents plays an important role. Adler wrote further that the mother is the child's main link to social life. After establishing close social ties between herself and the child, she builds this relationship to include the father. From this initial family setting the child may then form social relationships to the society at large.

The present study investigated the general hypothesis that remembered childhood experiences which do not foster, or interfere with the process of fostering the development of social interest, relate

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<sup>1</sup>A large portion of the present research was carried out at the Veterans Administration Center, Bath, N. Y.

positively to anomie. And that experiences fostering the development of social interest, relate negatively to anomie. It was hypothesized further that the relationship of early experience memories to anomie would be similar for middle-aged adults and for college students.

More specifically, it was predicted that anomie will correlate positively with memories of the following experiences:

1. *Being brought up in a socially disorganized and anxiety generating household*, exemplified by extreme poverty and frequent discord between parents. This would impede the development of social interest. Adler has stated that in order to enlarge her relationship with the child to a relationship involving the father, the mother must herself be interested in the father (3, p. 373). Thus, a harmonious family is necessary for the development of social interest. Secondly, an instable household would not be capable of acquainting the child in any consistent way with the structure and value of society at large.

2. *High rate of residential mobility and lack of acceptance of the family in the community*. This prediction assumed that stability and acceptance in the community are conducive to spreading social interest from the family to the community.

3. *Having had cold and rejecting parents or parents who themselves lacked social interest*. Here it was assumed that the learning of social interest can occur in the child only if close ties exist between it and the parents, and if the parents themselves possess what they are to impart to the child. Adler has stated that social interest develops through identification which is learned by the child and which can take place only if the child can relate to others and can feel as a part of the whole.

4. *Frustration through being asked to set and achieve goals not consonant with one's abilities, or being discouraged in attempts to set and achieve socially acceptable goals*. This assumed that in setting and achieving socially acceptable goals, the child exercises his developing social interest. Chronic frustration in connection with such activity may lead to the association of anxiety with social goals and thus also with social interest.

5. *Failure to establish satisfactory relationships with one's siblings*. It was assumed that the development of social interest progresses as the child learns to generalize his initial relationship with his mother to his whole family as the essential unit of the society.

It was further predicted that the following memories, conceptually opposite to those above and referring to experiences assumed to foster the development of social interest, would correlate negatively with anomie: (a) being brought up in an organized and stable household; (b) having lived in a community where the family was well accepted; (c) having had warm and close parent relationships; (d) being encouraged to develop socially acceptable goals; and (e) having had close relationships with one's siblings.

#### METHOD

One hundred and eighty-four employees at a VA Center were used as *Ss* in the first sample. The employee population, a total of about 600 was assumed to approximate the small community population with about 6,000 inhabitants where the Center is located. A total of 310 questionnaires in self-addressed envelopes were distributed anonymously to the employees by their supervisors. From these 265 were returned. After screening out questionnaires that lacked essential information, such as *S's* sex, a total of 102 male and 82 female *Ss* remained in the study. Their mean age was 42.68 and 43.46 years, respectively, and their mean education 10.42 and 12.66 years, the latter being significant ( $p < .01$ ). The *N* varied for the various measures, since some items were left incomplete by a number of *Ss*, and some items, such as those relating to siblings, did not apply to all *Ss*. The employees will be henceforth referred to as the adult sample.

In a second sample 113 college freshmen and sophomores in a psychology class filled out the questionnaires. After screening out incomplete responses, 34 male and 65 female *Ss* remained. Again the *N* varied for the various measures for the same reasons as given above.

The instruments consisted of a slightly modified Srole anomie scale (12) and a childhood experience questionnaire (CEQ).

The anomie scale consisted of 5 opinion items with each of which *S* expressed agreement or disagreement on a 5-point scale, scored from 0 to 4, the maximum score being 20. The anomie scale was designed to incorporate the essential characteristics of the anomic mode of thought according to anomie theory (4) and has been the main instrument for assessing psychological anomie in recent literature. The items are:

1. In spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse.
2. It's hardly fair to bring children into the world with the way things look for the future.
3. Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today, and let tomorrow take care of itself.
4. These days a person doesn't really know whom he can count on.
5. There's little use writing to public officials because often they aren't really interested in the problems of the average man.

These items were interspersed among 10 buffer items and 5 items scorable in the opposite direction from those of the Srole scale to reduce and control a potential acquiescent response set. In computing our data, however, only the 5 original Srole items were used, to make our results comparable to those of others.

The test-retest reliability for the anomie scale was found to be .70 with 61 *Ss*, over a 2-year interval.

The CEQ consisted of 102 items of memories of childhood experiences grouped into the following 7 areas: relationship to — community and family, 10; mother,

32; father, 32; older brother, 7; older sister, 7; younger brother, 7; and younger sister, 7. The mother and father items were parallel in construction; and so were the items regarding the 4 areas of sibling relationships. Examples of the items can be seen in Table 2. Each *S* was instructed to check on a 6-point scale how characteristic the experience expressed in each item had been for him.

The CEQ items were selected on the basis of factor-analytic results of responses on a questionnaire of 158 items (10), developed by the Age Center of New England, and on the basis of pilot work with new items to represent experience areas that were not present in the original scale. The items were selected to represent each identifiable factor and each childhood experience memory which was predicted to correlate with anomie. Even though memory is subjective, it is felt that in studies such as the present one, the remembered experiences may be more meaningful psychologically than the actual occurrence of physical events.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean anomie for the adult male *S*s was 8.73 while for the females it was 7.28, with 20 as the possible maximum. The difference was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Past research has shown a negative relationship between education and anomie (11), and in the present sample there was a correlation of  $-.45$  ( $p < .01$ ) between the two variables. In view of this relationship, the finding that the females had a lower mean anomie score may be due to the fact that they had a higher education than the males, by over 2 years.

It was also observed that the males had a small acquiescent response set while the females showed a small effect in the opposite direction. This was found by comparing the scores on the 5 original anomie items where agreement indicates anomie, with those on the 5 conceptually opposite items where disagreement indicates anomie. When these effects were removed by a correction factor, the statistically significant difference between men and women disappeared. Thus, it is also possible that the small response sets in opposite directions for the male and female *S*s gave rise to the small, but statistically significant difference between the two samples.

The mean anomie scores for the college students were 6.65 for the males and 6.52 for the females.

The difference in mean anomie scores between the student and the adult *S*s could be due to two factors: (*a*) the students representing a different segment of the population were in closer contact with education; and (*b*) both male and female students showed a small dissenting response set as compared to the acquiescent response set in the adult males. Age in itself does not correlate with anomie, as has been shown previously (11), and in the present combined adult sample the correlation coefficient obtained between age and anomie was only .03.

For the student sample, of course, there was not enough variance in age to expect a correlation.

In Table 1 it can be seen readily that for the four *S* groups together (for whom  $4 \times 102 = 408$  correlations were calculated) the number of significant correlations was 91 which exceeds by far the 20.4 that would be expected at the 5% chance level. However, among adult

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF CORRELATIONS SIGNIFICANT AT THE .05 LEVEL OR BETTER BETWEEN 102 CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE (CEQ) ITEMS AND THE MODIFIED SROLE ANOMIE SCALE, FOR FOUR GROUPS OF SUBJECTS

CEQ areas relationship to:	number of items	Adults		Students	
		male	female	male	female
A. family and community	10	4	2	1	1
B. mother	32	16	2	17	7
C. father	32	8	2	8	3
D. older brother	7	3	0	0	1
E. older sister	7	0	0	6	0
F. younger brother	7	0	1	2	2
G. younger sister	7	3	0	1	1
totals	102	34	7	35	15 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Total of 91 significant correlations out of 408 correlations calculated.

female *Ss* separately only 7 of the 102 correlations were significant beyond the .05 level. It can also be seen that the male students had more significant correlations than the females, 35 as compared to 15.

Possibly the CEQ is more applicable to men since most of the pilot work with the scale was done with male *Ss*. Possibly also the interference in the development of social interest can be assessed better with the CEQ in males than in females. According to Adler, the identification process which is essential for the development of social interest is initiated in the child's relationship to its mother, following which the relationship is spread to include the father (3, p. 373). In the case of the male child, the father then becomes the main identification object. Because of these reasons perhaps the process of developing social interest is less complicated in the female child.

The essential importance of the mother as compared with the father in the initial development of social interest is also supported by the observation in Table 1 that there were altogether twice as

many significant correlations between anomie and the remembered experiences associated with mother than with experiences associated with father, 42 versus 21.

From Table 1 support can also be seen for the hypothesis that the relationship of early experience memories to anomie is similar in middle-aged adults and college students, at least in the case of the males. The relationship is also similar to our previous findings with an aging sample (10), and to preliminary findings with teen-agers. On the basis of cross-sectional evidence one may thus state that the relationship holds throughout the life span, from the early teens to old age.

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients between anomie and some CEQ items. To save space, only items having at least one significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlation are presented, and only in the more significant areas of relationship to family and community, and to mother.<sup>2</sup>

The results, partly included in Table 2, support the general hypothesis. The 5 predictions are supported by the positive correlations between anomie and (a) items A-5 and 8, memories of anxiety-generating household; (b) A-2 and 6, experience of much residential mobility and unstable neighborhood; (c) items B-2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 16, 20, 25, and 29, referring to mother, and parallel items C-6, 9, 16, 20, and 29, referring to father but not included in Table 2, expressing experiences that would interfere with learning to identify with the parents because of their cold, rejecting, or unstable character, and experiences suggesting that parents themselves lacked knowledge of social norms and values; (d) item B-27 (as C-27 also significant in relationship to father), memories of experiences where culturally defined goals, such as achievement orientation, could become associated with frustration and anxiety; (e) items (not included in the table) expressing memories of frustrating experiences with one's siblings, such as "to have an older brother with whom I have had many quarrels," and "to have an older sister who had as little as possible to do with me."

From Table 2 it can be further seen that the predictions of negative relationships between anomie and CEQ items expressing experiences that were assumed to be essential in the identification process and the development of social interest, were largely supported. Concerning experiences associated with parents, it seems that loving respecting, and confiding in the parents were very important. Items,

<sup>2</sup>A complete set of correlation tables can be obtained by writing to the author.

TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ANOMIE AND CHILD EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

CEQ items	Adults <sup>a</sup>		Students <sup>b</sup>	
	male	female	male	female
A. <i>Relationship to family and community.</i> I know from my own personal experience as a child what it is:				
2. To do a lot of moving from one place to another.	-.07	.38 <sup>c</sup>	-.24	-.01
4. To have parents who are highly respected in the community.	-.23	.15	-.15	-.19
5. To have impoverished parents who can afford no more than the bare necessities.	.23	.40	.08	.09
6. To live in one of the "worst" or "toughest" neighborhoods.	.33	-.07	-.14	.03
7. To have parents who love and admire each other.	-.11	-.13	-.46	.08
8. To live in a house filled with worry (about finances, ill health, or anything else).	.24	.13	.24	.34
B. <i>Relationship to mother.</i> I know from my own personal experience as a child what it is:				
1. To have a mother with the same ideals that I have accepted and made mine.	-.11	-.10	-.41	-.18
2. To have a mother who is disappointed with her lot in life.	.34	.13	.41	.09
3. To have a mother who thinks highly of me.	-.11	.02	-.39	-.22
4. To have a mother who has been more interested in herself or in other things than she has been in me.	.23	.13	.47	.06
6. To have a mother who acts as if she does not care for me.	.23	.03	-.05	.21
7. To have a mother who praises her children when they get good grades in school.	-.30	.01	-.35	-.26
8. To have a mother who evokes my affection.	-.16	-.38	-.46	-.05
9. To have a mother who does not appreciate me.	.29	.02	.53	.30
10. To have the kind of mother that children always feel free to confide in about everything they do.	-.22	.08	-.57	-.28
11. To have a mother with whom I have little in common.	.22	-.08	.15	.13
13. To have a mother who does not worry unduly about my well-being.	-.02	.07	-.17	-.35
14. To have a mother who encouraged me to make my own decisions, to try things on my own early in life.	.14	-.05	-.42	-.05
16. To have a mother with a violent temper which she would let out at me when I did something she didn't like.	.31	.19	.20	.03
17. To have a mother who put a lot of emphasis on the importance of controlling feelings.	.21	.07	-.37	.07

TABLE 2. (continued)

	CEQ items	Adults <sup>a</sup>		Students <sup>b</sup>	
		male	female	male	female
18.	To have a mother whose punishments depended on what mood she was in.	-.35	-.12	.39	.07
20.	To have a mother who hurt my feelings by making fun of me, teasing, laughing at my stupid mistakes.	.37	-.05	.41	.18
21.	To have a mother who evokes my respect.	-.24	-.44	-.48	-.11
23.	To have a mother who is sick much of the time.	.01	.02	-.05	-.28
25.	To have a mother who distrusts me (believes that I do things behind her back).	.21	-.06	.27	.29
26.	To have a mother who is able to spend a lot of time entertaining her children . . . playing games with them, going on picnics, taking them to the circus, and so forth.	.04	-.02	.01	-.29
27.	To have a mother who never really wanted me to achieve anything in life.	.27	.12	.70	.07
29.	To have a mother who does not have any definite goals in life.	.16	-.04	.54	.08
30.	To have a mother who gives her children an enormous amount of care and attention.	-.14	.00	-.49	-.10
31.	To have a mother who always set my goals so high that I could never really reach them.	.24	-.04	.27	.11
32.	To have a mother who puts her greatest effort into helping her children throughout the emotional crises of growing up.	-.21	-.04	-.44	.06

<sup>a</sup>Section A, 84 male and 67 female Ss; Section B, 95 male and 80 female Ss.

<sup>b</sup>Sections A and B, 34 male and 65 female Ss.

<sup>c</sup>Italics indicate correlations significant beyond the .05 level.

such as B-8, 10, 21, and C-8, 10, 21, showed rather consistent significant correlations for the 4 groups of Ss with both parents.

The negative correlations between anomie and good sibling relationships appeared especially important; almost half of the items correlated significantly. These were such items as "to have an older brother (or sister) whom I've looked up to and admired," "to have an older brother (or sister) in whom I can confide," "to have an older brother (or sister) who guided, taught, and looked out for me," and "to have an older sister (or younger sister or brother) whom I also consider one of my closest friends."

Several apparent inconsistencies were observed in the results, such as those in items B-17 and 18. For the adult males the memory of a mother who stressed the control of feelings correlated positively with



anomie, while for the student males the correlation was negative. In the same way the experience of having had a mother whose punishment depended on her mood, correlated negatively with anomie for adult males while a positive correlation was obtained for the student males. One could try to explain these inconsistencies on the basis that many of the college students were still living with their parents, while probably most of the adults did not and many of their parents were deceased. The correlations, however, are not high and the possibility of significance due to chance cannot be discounted. Further discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of the present paper.

#### SUMMARY

One-hundred-and-two male and 82 female adults, and 34 male and 65 female college students were given a modified Srole anomie scale and a Childhood Experience Questionnaire referring to childhood experience memories about one's relationships to family and community, parents, and siblings. The main results were: the general hypothesis was found tenable that memories of childhood experiences which do not foster or do actually interfere with the process of fostering the development of social interest relate positively to anomie; while memories of experiences fostering the development of social interest relate negatively to anomie, as represented by the Srole scale.

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