

DEPRECIATION AND ACCUSATION TENDENCIES: EMPIRICAL SUPPORT¹

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Neurosis is viewed by Adler as a mistaken attitude toward the self and the world. From these, the neurotic develops a goal of superiority "on the useless side of life" (1, p. 255). To protect his self-esteem under these conditions the neurotic tends to resort to various forms of safeguarding behavior. Among the most common of these "safeguards" are the tendencies to depreciate others—raising one's own estimation of oneself by belittling others—and to level accusations against them—blaming others for one's own shortcomings (1, pp. 267-271).

This paper aims to prove empirically that neurotics do engage, more than normals, in depreciating and accusing others, in this case specifically their parents.

Two studies will be reported. The first was conducted in the United States, while the second is based on data collected in a traditional culture—India. Although the measurement instruments were different, an opportunity for a cross-cultural comparison is provided.

STUDY I. DEPRECIATION TENDENCY

Adler's postulate that neurotics tend to depreciate others led to the formulation and testing of the following hypothesis: The perceived similarity between parental figures and "negative" figures, i.e., a person who dislikes me, an unsuccessful person, and an unhappy person, will be higher in neurotic *Ss* than in well-adjusted *Ss*. The perceived similarity between parental figures and "positive" ones, i.e., closest friend, successful and happy persons, will follow the opposite patterns; it will be higher in well-adjusted *Ss* than in neurotics.

Method

Subjects. The *Ss* were 24 undergraduate students, males and females, at the University of Missouri. Twelve *Ss* were referrals to the Student Health Center, diagnosed as neurotic, and recommended for therapy. The other 12 *Ss* were well-adjusted students serving as controls.

¹The preparation of this paper was supported, in parts, by Grants GS-2094 and GS-29193 from the National Science Foundation (Uriel G. Foa, Principal Investigator). Thanks expressed to Yona Teichman for her valuable comments and to Dr. Bishwa Catterjee who interviewed the Indian subjects.

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Procedure. The Landfield (7) revision of the Role Construct Repertory Test (REP test) was administered to both groups anonymously. In the test the *S* is asked to rate a list of persons (roles) according to 15 personal bipolar constructs, elicited in the testing situation. The *S* describes each person (role) according to one of the two extremes of the construct, e.g., mature or immature. When neither extreme can be applied, the rating is "N" or "?". Thus, *S* has four possibilities for rating a person on each of the 15 personal constructs.

Only the roles of father, mother, closest friend, person who dislikes me, and successful, happy, unsuccessful, and unhappy person were considered in the present study.

Scoring and analysis. The degree of similarity between parents and the six other roles was computed as follows: If both roles were rated the same extreme of the construct, the pair scored 1 point for similarity; otherwise the score was 0 points. Since each pair of roles was rated for the 15 bipolar constructs, the degree of similarity between pairs ranged from 15 points for complete similarity or lack of differentiation between two roles, to 0 points for no similarity or total differentiation between the pair of roles. The difference between scores for the two groups was tested for significance by the Mann-Whitney U Test for small groups (10).

Results

Table 1 presents the comparisons between the two parental roles and the other six roles. As predicted, when parental roles were related to favorable figures—closest friend, successful and happy person—similarity scores were consistently higher for well-adjusted *S*s than for neurotics. When parents were related to unfavorable figures—one

TABLE 1. MEAN SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PARENTS AND OTHERS AS RATED BY NEUROTICS AND WELL-ADJUSTED CONTROLS IN THE UNITED STATES

Compared roles	Mean similarity scores			Mann-Whitney U	P
	Neurotics N = 12	Controls N = 12	D		
Mother with:					
Closest friend	6.5	10.2	-3.7	33	.025
Successful person	6.0	8.3	-2.3	47	.08
Happy person	6.1	8.8	-2.7	42	.05
Unsuccessful person	5.3	3.0	2.3	42	.05
Unhappy person	6.2	4.1	2.1	51	ns
One who dislikes me	4.7	2.8	1.9	22	.01
Father with:					
Closest friend	5.7	8.8	-3.1	35	.025
Successful person	6.3	8.0	-1.7	51	ns
Happy person	7.1	8.5	-1.4	55	ns
Unsuccessful person	5.4	3.6	1.8	47	.08
Unhappy person	5.2	4.2	1.0	52	ns
One who dislikes me	4.7	3.8	.9	62	ns

who dislikes me, unsuccessful and unhappy persons—similarity scores were higher for neurotic *Ss* than for normals. This pattern was generally statistically significant in the case of both parents, but more so when the mother role was considered.

STUDY 2. ACCUSATION TENDENCY

Most investigators characterize parent-child relationships mainly by the exchange of affection and love, respect and esteem (2, 8, 12). There is empirical evidence that children indeed expect to receive from their parents mainly love and status (esteem), with needs like information, money, goods and services ranking lower in the hierarchy (11). Thus, when persons state to have received relatively little love and status from their parents this can be taken to represent an accusation of them.

In accordance with Adler's postulate that neurotics more than normal controls tend to accuse others, we formulated and tested the hypothesis: Neurotics will perceive their parents as providing them with less status (esteem, respect) and love (affection, warmth) and taking away from them more status and love than well-adjusted *Ss* will do.

Method

Subjects. The *Ss* were Indian neurotic and well-adjusted males and females. The neurotics were patients at a mental hospital in Banaras; the well-adjusted were randomly chosen from the Banaras population. *Ss* from high or low socio-economic classes were excluded from the sample. None of the *Ss* had been abroad or intensively exposed to Western culture. The *N* for each part of the study was: *Neurotics*—son-father role, 25; daughter-father role, 11; son-mother role, 21; daughter-mother role, 14. *Controls*—son-father role, 46; daughter-father role, 57; son-mother role, 49; daughter-mother role, 54.

Instrument. *Ss'* perceptions of parental behavior was measured by the Role Behavior Test (4). This instrument records interpersonal behavior in such role pairs as son-mother, son-father, husband-wife, foreman-worker, pupil-teacher, as perceived by a person occupying one of the two roles. In the present study, however, only parent-child roles were studied, and the observer was always the subject, the actor always the parent. The test as used in the present study provided scores on the perceived frequency of interpersonal behavior generated by combining elements of two underlying dichotomous facets or conceptual dimensions: (a) *mode* of behavior: acceptance or *giving*, and rejection or *taking away*, and (b) *resource*, out of six classes (5): *love* (affect, warmth) and *status* (esteem, recognition, prestige). The object or recipient of the behavior was always the self.

The four types of interpersonal behavior or variables resulting from the possible combinations of the facet elements are: giving love, giving status, taking away love, taking away status. Generalized examples of items for the four variables are: (a) Other loves subject very much. (b) Other displays respect and esteem for subject. (c) Other displays dislike and hostility toward subject. (d) Other displays disrespect toward subject.

Each variable is represented in the test by three items having a similar meaning, but expressed in different terms. To avoid possible sequential effects, items belonging to the same variable are scattered randomly in the test. The items are semi-projective. Each is a short description of behavior in a given reciprocal role. Following each item *S* is asked to state the frequency of occurrence of the described behavior on a five point scale (0 to 4). The sum of points is the score for the variable. The range of scores is from 0 to 12 for each variable, 0 representing lack of perception of the described behavior, 12, high occurrence of the behavior.

The differences between the means for the two groups were tested for significance by t-test for two independent samples (3).

Results

It was predicted that neurotic compared to normal *Ss* would describe their parents as giving them less and taking away more status (respect) and love (affection). Table 2 presents the comparisons

TABLE 2. MEANS OF PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS BY NEUROTIC AND NORMAL MEN AND WOMEN IN INDIA

Variable	Men			Women		
	Neurotics	Normals	D	Neurotic	Normals	D
Mother:	N = 21	N = 49		N = 14	N = 54	
giving						
status	6.14	8.12	-1.98*	4.93	8.09	-3.16**
love	7.29	9.24	-1.95*	6.71	9.44	-2.73*
taking away						
love	1.81	2.24	- .43	3.29	1.96	+1.33
status	2.67	2.22	+ .45	3.00	2.28	+ .72
Father:	N = 25	N = 46		N = 11	N = 57	
giving						
status	6.08	8.35	-2.27**	6.55	8.71	-2.15*
love	7.08	9.53	-2.45**	5.55	8.92	-3.37***
taking away						
love	3.28	1.35	+1.93**	3.45	1.24	+2.21†
status	4.16	1.72	+2.44**	2.82	1.78	+1.04

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; all two-tailed tests.

between the two groups for male and female *Ss*. All except one comparison (mother takes away love from male *Ss*) are in the predicted direction ($p < .001$ by sign test): neurotics described their parents as giving them less and taking away more status and love than well-adjusted *Ss* did.

The comparison between perceived mother's and father's behaviors toward *S* reveals a reversed trend to the one obtained in the first study. In the Indian sample, the differences between the perceived parental behaviors by neurotic and well-adjusted *S*s, regardless of sex, are larger and more significant when father-child relationships are considered than when mother-child relationships are considered ($p < .05$ by sign test). Namely, Indian neurotic *S*s, as compared to their controls, tended to accuse their fathers rather than their mothers, a perceptual pattern which is the opposite of the one found in the American college sample.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to offer empirical support to Adler's view that the neurotic, to a greater extent than the normal, employs depreciation and accusation of significant others to safeguard his self-esteem.

Two studies conducted in different cultures, the United States and India, and applying different methodologies proved that indeed neurotics, more than normals, tend to depreciate and accuse significant others.

Interesting cultural differences were found: While the American neurotics showed more depreciation of the mother, the Indian neurotics tended to accuse the father more, then did the respective normal counterparts.

This would seem to be related to differences in the family structure. Most investigators agree that in the American culture the mother-child relationship is more intensive than the father-child relationship, and that the mother plays an important and crucial role in shaping the personality of her children (2, 12). In the Indian family, on the other hand, the father was found to occupy the major position of authority and, thus, may have a stronger psychological impact (6, 9). This cultural difference in the power position within the family seems to affect the direction and targets of the depreciation and accusation tendencies, respectively, among the neurotics in the two cultures.

SUMMARY

The Adlerian proposition that neurotics, in order to preserve their self-esteem, tend to depreciate and accuse significant others was tested with regard to parents. Neurotic and well-adjusted persons in the

United States and in India were tested and compared. Depreciation and accusation tendencies, respectively, were found to be used as safeguards in the two cultures. However, the parent at whom these behaviors are directed was found to differ in accordance with the cultural pattern.

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