

## Age-Related Correlates of Self-Derogation: Report of Childhood Experiences\*

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### PROBLEM

The following is a report of the differential relationships observed between retrospective reports of eight childhood experiences and self-derogation (SD) scores for adult subjects in five age groupings. Variability in the relationships between particular experiences and SD among the different age-groupings was to be expected for any of several reasons: social role-related variability in the evaluative significance of particular attributes (Kaplan, 1970); generational differences in evaluative standards; variability in interaction effects between earlier experiences and later circumstances associated with particular ages; etc.

### METHOD

The data were collected from a representative sample ( $N = 500$ ) of the adult population of Harris County (including the city of Houston), Texas, by personal interview using survey research techniques. SD (the relatively intense characteristic negative affect evoked by subjective consideration of personal qualities, achievements, and behaviour) was operationally defined by a factorially derived index. Two score groupings were employed for present purposes: 'High' SD and 'Low' SD (factor scores above and below zero respectively). The analysis took the form of examining the relationship between SD and each of the 'childhood' variables for the five age groupings. Chi-square was used to test the hypothesis of no relationship, adopting the .05 level of significance as the criterion for acceptance or rejection of the relationship. Further methodological details are reported by Kaplan and Pokorny (1969).

### RESULTS

The findings are summarized in Table I. There, for each variable, the percentage of high SD scores associated with each variable value is presented for the different age groupings. Apparently the significance of these variables for predicting level of

SD is contingent upon the subject's age. A different pattern of childhood experience was significantly associated with high SD scores for each age grouping. *Subjects below age 30* tended to have high SD scores if they reported that, during childhood, they were very much afraid of being punished by their parents; they received poorer grades than most of the children they knew; and they were not as good looking as most of the children they knew. *Subjects aged 30 to 39* tended to have high SD scores if they reported that during childhood they were somewhat or very much afraid of being laughed at by other children. *Subjects aged 40 to 49* tended to display high SD scores if they reported that as children their health was better than most of the children they knew. For *subjects aged 50 to 59*, SD was not related to any of the childhood variables at a statistically significant level. *Subjects aged 60 or above* tended to have high SD scores if they reported that during childhood they were: very much afraid of getting a bad report card, were the eldest among their like-sex siblings, were somewhat or very much afraid of being left alone, were very much afraid of being punished by their parents, and were somewhat or very much afraid of being laughed at by other children.

### DISCUSSION

The nature of the research design is such that the observed relationships are congruent with any of a variety of interpretations: (1) the earlier childhood experience influenced subsequent adult SD level; (2) subjects with high SD scores are more willing to disclose early self-devaluing experiences; (3) self-derogating subjects tend to perceptual distortion in childhood recollections. In any case, however, the above findings have implications for future investigations of self-attitudes, particularly in view of the frequently contradictory findings and low predictive value of previous studies (Wylie, 1961; Hamachek, 1965; Rosenberg, 1965; Coopersmith, 1967). The fact that particular reports of childhood experiences were associated with self-derogation scores *only for specific age groupings* implies that the variables are of differential affective significance for various

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TABLE I  
 Percentage of subjects with high self-derogation scores by age and selected reports of childhood experiences

Childhood characteristic	Age grouping				
	Below 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 or above
Afraid of getting a bad report card?					
Not at all .. .. .	46 (37)*	48 (58)	45 (55)	65 (34)	37 (46)
Somewhat or very much .. ..	58 (72)	57 (82)	53 (58)	54 (37)	67** (18)
Birth order by sex of respondent					
Oldest of same sex .. .. .	56 (36)	50 (36)	44 (27)	53 (17)	75** (12)
All others .. .. .	54 (72)	55 (103)	51 (87)	60 (55)	38 (52)
Afraid of being left alone?					
Not at all .. .. .	55 (65)	55 (101)	51 (80)	62 (55)	35 (48)
Somewhat or very much .. ..	52 (44)	49 (39)	44 (34)	50 (16)	71** (17)
Afraid of being punished by parents?					
Not at all or somewhat .. .. .	48 (91)	51 (116)	52 (89)	57 (58)	36 (55)
Very much .. .. .	83** (18)	67 (24)	40 (25)	64 (14)	90** (10)
Afraid of being laughed at by other children?					
Not at all .. .. .	51 (53)	36 (72)	45 (60)	63 (46)	36 (45)
Somewhat or very much .. ..	57 (56)	72** (68)	54 (54)	52 (25)	65** (20)
Relative to other children, health was					
Better .. .. .	55 (20)	55 (44)	64** (33)	62 (21)	52 (21)
Same or poorer .. .. .	55 (88)	53 (96)	43 (81)	57 (51)	40 (43)
Relative to other children, school grades were					
Better .. .. .	33 (27)	50 (34)	57 (37)	47 (17)	29 (21)
Same .. .. .	59 (70)	54 (91)	40 (62)	60 (50)	52 (33)
Poorer .. .. .	75† (12)	60 (15)	67 (12)	80 (5)	60 (10)
Relative to other children, subject was					
Better looking or looked about the same	50 (96)	52 (126)	48 (105)	58 (67)	43 (61)
Not as good looking .. .. .	83** (12)	77 (13)	67 (9)	67 (3)	75 (4)

\* Parenthetical entries indicate number of subjects in the cell.

\*\* For this age group, subjects in this cell are significantly more likely to be self-derogatory than subjects in the alternate cell:  $\chi^2 = 3.8$  or above,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

† For this age group, linear relationship, with subjects in this cell being most likely (relative to the other two cells) to manifest high self-derogation scores:  $\chi^2 = 6.0$  or above,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

population subgroupings. Future investigations of the genesis of self-attitudes should either establish that a hypothetical variable is of uniform affective significance throughout the population, or determine that the relationship is (not) accounted for by particular population subgroups. This procedure should increase understanding of the process by which SD is generated, since the interpretation of an observed relationship which holds for the total population might be quite different from that of an association which is specific to a particular role category. The end product of this procedure should be the reduction of contradictory research findings and increased predictability of the nature of self-attitudes.

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