

Social Class Membership and Early Childhood Memories

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## SOCIAL CLASS MEMBERSHIP AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

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Although the pervasive influence of social class membership upon intellectual functioning (3), childrearing practices (15), and sex-role identification (12) has been investigated, socioeconomic correlates of specific cognitive functions, such as the recall of early experiences, have not been studied. A theoretical formulation of the relation between early memories and the social milieu was attempted by Schachtel (13), who stated that the uniqueness of early memories is blunted during the socialization process in which memory schemata become conventionalized according to cultural norms. Schachtel's formulation suggests that intrapsychic events, such as repression, are strongly influenced by sociocultural factors.

Schachtel's formulation may be viewed as an extension of Adler's (1) conclusion that the selective recall of memories is a function of an individual's contemporary style of life. Adler's view has been confirmed in several investigations. For example, Lieberman (8) found a significant relation between adults' personality structure, as revealed by projective techniques, and psychological processes reflected in early memories. Edwards (6) demonstrated that experiences which coincide with a current frame of reference will be more readily recalled. Ansbacher (2) administered the Maslow Security-Insecurity Test to college students and found a relation between early memories and current attitudes. Purcell (11) also collected data on college students and reported significant correlations between affective features of childhood and adult memories and Maslow's scale. The relative frequencies of memories categorized on dimensions of optimism vs. pessimism and joy vs. fear were related to current security feelings. These inves-

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tigations have involved adults or college students. The recollections of younger age groups have not been systematically investigated.

A basic assumption in this study is that an adolescent's recall of early memories is a function of his current frame of reference, which is defined as a highly generalized attitude that controls the expression of any specific attitude, belief, or idea. It is likely that the nonavailability of motivational states to consciousness (i.e., repression), which has been shown to differ significantly between socioeconomic groups, is a significant aspect of an individual's frame of reference.

Sears *et al.* (15) reported a significant relation between the development of guilt or conscience in kindergarten Ss and the application of love-oriented techniques of discipline. These techniques, which consist of praise, use of isolation, reasoning, and withdrawal of love, were more frequently employed by middle class than by lower class mothers. Based upon this finding, it was hypothesized that middle class adolescents will have more memories consisting of guilt feelings. Furthermore, on the basis of research (9, 10) indicating that the expression of angry feelings is less highly valued and rewarded in the middle class than in the lower class, it was predicted that lower class Ss will have more memories of angry feelings than middle class Ss. Finally, it was hypothesized that memories involving euphoric affect and family members should be recalled more frequently by middle class than by lower class adolescents, since previous research (9) has shown that more positive familial experiences and less marital conflict are associated with this social class. It should be noted that some of these hypotheses are based on previous investigations which involved parents of kindergarten children. Schaefer and Bayley (14) have demonstrated that maternal behavior along the dimension of love vs. hostility remains consistent from early childhood to preadolescence. In the absence of any data, it will be assumed that certain attitudes of adolescents' parents are similar to attitudes of kindergarten children's parents who are within the same social class.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Subjects*

The sample consisted of 40 13-year-old adolescents attending teenage clubs in two community centers in New York City. Ten boys and 10 girls were selected randomly from each center. One center was located in a stable middle-income residential area, and the other was located in a stable low-income residential area. All children were attending the seventh grade.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

Socioeconomic status was determined by the father's occupation and the family's income. The frequency of occupations within the lower class ranged from chronically unemployed ( $N = 5$ ) to semiskilled ( $N = 6$ ), with the mode at the "unskilled laborer" class ( $N = 9$ ). Range of income

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within the lower class group was between \$1500 and \$3300, with the mode at \$2000-\$2500 ( $N = 11$ ). Range of occupations within the middle class was from "skilled" ( $N = 5$ ) to "professional" ( $N = 5$ ), with the mode at "white-collar" and "business" ( $N = 10$ ). Income within this class ranged from \$4000 to \$7000, with the mode at \$6000-\$6500 ( $N = 11$ ).

### *Procedure*

An interview was employed to elicit early memories. Each child was told the following: "I am interested in learning about the earliest experiences which people your age are able to recall. Tell me about two of your very earliest memories in as much detail as possible. Try to recall how you felt during these experiences and your age at the time they occurred."

Each memory was recorded verbatim. Open-ended questions were asked after the recall of the two memories in order to clarify ambiguous statements and to explore further the emotional states implied in each memory. Only two memories were asked for since pretesting had indicated that asking for a greater number usually elicited a defensive reaction such as "that's too tough" or "I can't do it." A few adolescents volunteered more than two memories so that the number of memories for middle class Ss was 43; the number for lower class Ss was 41.

The memories were categorized by two graduate students who were unfamiliar with the hypotheses and with the source of the memories. Each memory was categorized in terms of the persons and emotions relevant to the hypotheses. Each category was defined, and parenthetical statements, consisting of examples of the kinds of responses which would be included in the category, were provided. Frequently, a memory was categorized in several ways since it contained references to more than one emotion or persons. Agreement between the coders was 88 per cent. Since there were no statistically significant differences between female and male Ss, the data for these groups were combined.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 indicates significant differences in early memories between the two social class groups. Lower class adolescents had significantly more memories containing references to angry feelings, while middle class adolescents had significantly more memories involving euphoric affect and siblings. Middle class Ss had significantly more memories consisting of references to parents, a result which may be related to Mayer's (9) finding that middle class parents are more likely to supervise their children's activities than are lower class parents. It seems likely that the middle class adolescent's current frame of reference would reflect this greater parental influence. The hypothesis that middle class adolescents, as compared with lower class adolescents, would report more memories with associated guilt feelings was not supported.

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TABLE I

FREQUENCIES OF MEMORIES INVOLVING PERSONS AND EMOTIONS OF TWO SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS

Content	Lower Class		Middle Class		$\chi^2$
	+†	○†	+†	○†	
Anger	8	33	1	42	4.81*
Euphoria	1	40	9	34	8.44**
Guilt	2	39	1	42	...
Sexual behavior	8	33	0	43	7.15**
Parents	10	31	30	13	19.19***
Siblings	1	40	7	36	6.41*
Relatives	6	35	7	36	...
Peers	7	34	3	40	1.11
Aggressive behavior	9	32	2	41	4.10*

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

† + indicates presence of specific content; ○ indicates lack of specific content.

No predictions were made concerning the frequency of memories containing references to "relatives," "peers," "aggressive behavior," and "sexual behavior." However, it was decided to test the difference between social classes for these variables since an examination of the reported memories indicated frequent reference to these concepts. Table I indicates nonsignificant differences between the two social classes for "relatives" and "peers." Significant differences were found between the social classes for "aggressive behavior" and "sexual behavior."

Whereas anger was defined as a passing emotional disturbance aroused by being interfered with or threatened, aggressive behavior was defined in terms of an overt response which consists of attacking or injuring other persons. The significantly greater recall of aggressive and sexual behavior and angry feelings by lower class Ss may be conceptualized in terms of greater repression in middle class adolescents. This interpretation tends to be supported by previous research on social class influences upon aggressive and sexual behavior. For example, employing a "guess who" technique to derive reputation scores of 12-year-olds of both sexes, Pope (10) found that fighting, toughness, and direct forms of heterosexual interest have greater prestige value among lower class than among middle class Ss. Davis (4) reported that, whereas the middle class adolescent is frequently punished for physical aggression and for sexual relations, the lower class adolescent may be rewarded for these activities. Furthermore, Kinsey *et al.* (7) showed that premarital relations occurred more often among semiskilled and unskilled laborers than among professional men and those who had achieved aca-

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demically beyond the ninth grade. These studies tend to support the interpretation that sexual and aggressive behavior and thoughts are more negatively reinforced and, therefore, more anxiety arousing and less available to conscious manipulation in middle class than in lower class Ss.

The conclusion that lower class Ss are less repressed than middle class Ss in terms of hostile affect will be further explored in an investigation which the author plans to undertake shortly. This study will consist of conditioning hostile content in a verbal operant conditioning situation. Partly on the basis of the results in the present study, it will be hypothesized that hostile content has more reinforcement value for lower class than for middle class Ss.

A controversial issue in previous research on early memories has been the S's age at the time of the events which are recalled. The finding of Dudycha and Dudycha (5) that the majority of their Ss recalled events that had occurred between 3 and 4 years of age may be a function of the socioeconomic level of the Ss employed in their study. The present study indicates large differences in the age of the early memories between lower and middle class adolescents. The average age of the recalled memory for lower class Ss was 8 years while  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years was the comparable age for middle class Ss.

This finding may be attributed to the marked defensive behavior which was apparent on the part of the lower class Ss as they related to an E who belonged to a different socioeconomic class. By giving relatively late memories, these Ss seemed intent on giving the impression that they were conforming to the demands of the situation, without revealing their earliest experiences.

The present finding that adolescents' memories are related to social class membership seems to have meaningful implications for clinical practice. Therapeutic procedures, such as orthodox psychoanalysis, which probe early experiences have been the basis for developing a theory of personality which has been assumed to be equally valid for diverse socioeconomic groups. The present study suggests the need for caution in such generalizations since the data obtained from these groups may not be uniform.

### SUMMARY

The major hypothesis of this investigation was that adolescents' recall of early experiences is a function of social class membership.

Forty 13-year-old adolescents were divided into lower class and middle class groups on the basis of family income and father's occupation. Early memories, which were obtained through interviews, were categorized in terms of the persons and emotions relevant to the hypotheses.

Significant differences in early memories between the low and middle class groups were obtained. Lower class adolescents had more memories containing references to angry feelings and aggressive and sexual behavior. Middle class Ss had significantly more memories involving euphoric affect,

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parents, and siblings. These results were related to the construct, repression. The relatively late age of memories recalled by the lower class Ss was attributed to their defensiveness while relating to a middle class E.

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