

A BEHAVIORAL APPROACH TOWARD STRENGTHENING
SELF-CONCEPT IN MENTAL RETARDATES

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THESIS

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Self can be described as being a hypothetical construct postulated to account for a prime experience which human organisms report and evidence in their behavior; specifically that they can be aware of their own being (existing, functioning). It would also seem appropriate to hold that the sense of self-identity is a developmental phenomenon which gradually unfolds across time (Guardo, 1968).

For some time, personality theorists have been concerned with the psychological construct referred to as the phenomenological self-concept. The basis of this concern is the belief that behavior is controlled, partially, by the individual's concept of self, coupled with the belief that the phenomenological self-concept is acquired or cultivated as a result of various environmental situations or experiences. If these experiences and environmental situations can be manipulated in any way to enhance the growth of positive self-concepts, they may contribute to the development of desired behavior.

Since the self-concept was first accepted by the behavioral sciences as a construct deserving of research, many and diversified studies have been published in which self-concept was a factor. However, a limited

number of these studies dealt with children and even a more limited number dealt with the mentally retarded.

Two general studies suggest that retardates are possibly not very different from normals in regard to the correlates of high self-esteem. Guthrie, Butler, Gorlow, and White (1964) found that retarded women were concerned about things that are also of concern to other women, such as popularity, sexual acceptability, compliance, and friendship, as well as fears of being ignored or rejected, giving and not receiving, and being angry with peers. Their ideals centered around themes of self-confidence, popularity, compliance, and friendship, charity, loyalty, assertion, awareness of others, and avoiding involvement with peers. The authors concluded that these self-attitudes and ideals resulted from the need for protection against abuse which these women had suffered in past experiences. Gorlow, Butler, and Guthrie (1968) found small but significant positive relationships between self-acceptance and intelligence, school achievement, success in the institutional training program, and success on parole. In addition, they found that retardates who were separated from their parents at an early age were more negative in their self-attitudes.

They also discovered that those expressing high degrees of self-acceptance tended to express less need for the support of others and to be more acceptant of their own hostility.

To date we have some evidence indicating that the retardate's self-concept is unfavorable and that his adjustment, generally, is poor. However, there is no general agreement even on these points (Ellis, 1970). Some writers claim that there is no clear evidence that retardates are generally maladjusted. Others say that it is uncommon to see a retarded child who presents no emotional maladjustment of moderate to severe degree (Guskin & Spicker, 1968; Phillips, 1966, p. 112). The predominance of evidence seems to be that retardates are more generally maladjusted (Beier, 1964, p. 459; Heber, 1964; Snyder, 1966).

A number of writers apparently believe that there is a consistent relationship between low IQ and low self-appraisal, and some studies support this conclusion (Bialer, 1968; Gorlow et al., 1968). Along this same vein, Rybolt (1969) found a significant relationship between response consistency and intelligence, with relatively more intelligent subjects evidencing more consistency. Other evidence suggests that retardates with better self-concepts achieve better (Heber,

1964).

Snyder, Jefferson, and Strauss (1965) found favorability of self-concept to be strongly related to reading achievement and to favorable personality variables in general. Snyder (1966) also found that a high-achieving versus a low-achieving, mildly retarded group had a better self-concept, better personality scores, and lower anxiety scores. Snyder concluded that personality variables are highly important in determining the extent to which mental retardates will achieve their intellectual potential.

Theoretically it can be said that self-concept is related to the number of successful endeavors an individual experiences. On this basis, self-concept would be lacking in mental retardates. Piers and Harris (1964) found that retardates had, in fact, fewer favorable self-concepts than normals, as measured by their scale, The Way I Feel About Myself.

The objective of this study was to systematize a method of strengthening self-concept in mental retardates through the use of operant conditioning techniques. This objective was pursued by investigating the effect of rewarding positive responses about self. A control group was given verbal reinforcement for positive statements about themselves.

An experimental group received verbal reinforcement plus a token reinforcement for positive statements about themselves. It was hypothesized that, at the end of the research period, the group receiving both verbal and token reinforcement would show a significantly higher level of self-concept than the group receiving verbal reinforcement only.

Various methods of measuring self-concept have been employed in previous research (e.g., self-report, peer report, teacher report, parent report). Taking into consideration the difficulty of validating self-report scales, the Piers and Harris (1964) inventory, The Way I Feel About Myself, was shown to possess a reliable internal consistency range (Kuder-Richardson Index range--.78 to .93). A revised scale of items from this inventory was used as the evaluation instrument in this study. Self-concept, as referred to herein, means the concept of self as measured by the evaluation scale employed in this research.

Method

Subjects. Fourteen male residents at Denton State School, Denton, Texas, were used as Ss. Using the system of classification by Sloan and Birch (1955), all Ss were functioning within the moderate range of mental retardation and were classified at Level II of

Adaptive Behavior (can learn functional academic skills to approximately fourth grade level by late teens and capable of self-maintenance in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations; needs supervised guidance when under mild social or economic stress, e.g., institutional work with some responsibility; some outside work with guidance and fairly close supervision). The Ss were participants in a token economy system initiated approximately four months prior to this research. Ss were matched pairs (based on token achievement at time of selection) and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. The mean IQ of the experimental group was 39.3, with a standard deviation of 8.18. The mean IQ of the control group was 39.7, with a standard deviation of 6.73.

Procedure. A preliminary pool of 50 items was developed from Piers' and Harris' (1964) 80-item scale, The Way I Feel About Myself. Items used were considered to be adaptable to and understandable by the Ss. Many items were rephrased and reworded in order to make them comprehensible to the Ss. As the Ss were unable to read or write at an adequate level, all items were administered and responded to verbally.

Following the pretest administration, items answered in one direction by fewer than 10%, or more than 90%,

were inspected and dropped, leaving a total of 33 items for the posttest administration. The complete set of 50 revised items, administration instructions, exact terminology used, and items eliminated appear in Appendix A.

The 50-item scale was administered to both groups at the beginning of the research period in order to determine each S's level of self-concept as measured by the scale. The items were scored by scale key.

The research period covered a span of four weeks. Every day (Monday through Friday) each S, in both groups, was instructed to "Tell me something good about yourself." A positive response received verbal reinforcement (e.g., "That's great", "Good boy", "Keep up the good work"), plus a token reward, for the experimental group. Only verbal reinforcement was given to the control group for a positive response. (It was determined prior to this research that the token itself represented immediate reward to the Ss as they had been previously conditioned as to what the tokens represented). During the first few days of the research period, Ss in both groups were primed as to what constituted a positive statement about themselves. After the third day, however, no prompting was given. At the end of the research period, a

posttest, consisting of 33 of the 50 items was administered to both groups.

Results

To judge the reliability of the scale, the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 was employed with results as shown in Table 1. The 50-item scale was administered to 20 Ss (six of whom did not participate in the

Table 1

Internal Consistency of Self-Concept Scores Estimated by Kuder-Richardson Formula 20

Number of Items	Number of <u>Ss</u>	Kuder-Richardson Index
50	20	.8879
33	20	.8597
33	14	.8476

study) in the pretest, and 33 items were administered to the 14 Ss on the posttest. These results indicate a high degree of reliability owing to the indicated internal consistency.

A t test (one-tailed) for matched groups was calculated to determine (a) any significant difference

between groups following the pretest, and (b) any significant difference between groups following the posttest. Results are shown in Table 2, reflecting no

Table 2

Pretest and Posttest Differences Between
Groups Based on 33 Item Scale

Group	Pretest			Posttest		
	Mean	S. D.	<u>t</u>	Mean	S. D.	<u>t</u>
Experimental	22.8	8.32	.696	29.0	8.88	2.10*
Control	20.0	7.48		22.4	5.91	

* $p < .05$.

significant difference between groups after the pretest, but showing a significant difference between groups following the posttest.

Discussion

The assumption that, following posttest evaluation, the group receiving both verbal and token reinforcement, for positive statements about themselves, would show a significantly higher level of self-concept than the group receiving only verbal reinforcement, was

confirmed. Results also indicate that the scale used possessed a high degree of reliability as measured for internal consistency.

Confirmation of the hypothesis indicates that self-concept can be strengthened through the use of operant conditioning techniques. Results also suggest that the token reward was a strong reinforcing agent for the Ss employed in this study, and was a responsible factor in the resultant significant difference between groups.

It can be implied that, if self-concept can be strengthened, we can expect stronger confidence and a reduction of negative attitudes. It can also be said that reinforcement itself can contribute to success in strengthening self-concept. Furthermore, with a stronger self-concept, the individual's social relations should improve correspondingly.

Although results of this research are positive and encouraging, consideration should be given to the smallness of sample used, and the lack of any measure of retention level by Ss in the experimental group, of strengthened self-concept. In addition, it would seem appropriate, for further research in this area, to use a longer period of time for the study. With

continuing research in this area contemplated, it could be hypothesized that more meaningful results and findings could be realized by incorporating some modifications in study design. Recommendations would include (a) a larger sampling of the population, with the use of two or more groups; (b) an extended period of time for the research period; and (c) the use of a post posttest evaluation to measure retention of any significant strengthening of self-concept.

APPENDIX A

ADMINISTRATION INSTRUCTIONS AND ITEM CONTENT
OF PRETEST AND POSTTEST EVALUATIONS

Instructions for responding to questions were given as follows:

"I am going to ask you a number of questions. If you think some of these questions are true of you, just say yes. If some of them are not true, just say no. Even if some of the questions are hard to answer, answer them anyway as well as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. Only you can tell me how you feel about yourself, so I hope you will tell me the way you really feel. If you do not understand any question or what you are to do, please let me know".

QUESTIONS

- 1. Do the boys on the dorm make fun of you?
 - * 2. Are you happy?
 - 3. Is it hard for you to make friends?
 - 4. Are you sad very often?
 - * 5. Are you smart?
 - 6. Are you bashful?
 - * 7. Do you like the way you look?
 - 8. Do most people like you?
 - * 9. Are you good on the dorm?
 - 10. Do you think its your fault when something goes wrong?
 - * 11. Do you cause trouble to anyone?
 - * 12. Are you strong?
 - * 13. Do you have good ideas?
 - * 14. Do you like the way you are?
 - 15. Are you good at making things with your hands?
 - 16. Do you give up or quit easy?
 - 17. Do you do many bad things?
 - 18. Are you nervous?
 - 19. Do you behave badly?
- * Items dropped from pretest item pool.

- * 20. Do you pick on other kids?
 - 21. Do your friends like your ideas?
 - 22. Do you get into trouble a lot?
 - * 23. Do you obey?
 - * 24. Are you lucky?
 - 25. Do you worry a lot?
 - 26. Do other people want you to do too much?
 - 27. Do you want your own way most of the time?
 - 28. Do you feel left out of things?
 - 29. Do you ask to do things to help a lot?
 - 30. Do you sleep good at night?
 - 31. Do you hate the school?
 - * 32. Are you sick a lot?
 - * 33. Are you mean to other people a lot?
 - 34. Are you unhappy (not happy)?
 - 35. Do you have a lot of friends?
 - * 36. Are you happy?
 - 37. Are you dumb about most things?
 - * 38. Are you good-looking?
 - 39. Do you get into a lot of fights?
 - * 40. Do the other boys like you?
 - 41. Do other people or kids pick on you?
 - 42. Do you wish you were different?
 - 43. Are you clumsy?
 - 44. Do you get mad easy?
 - * 45. Do girls like you?
 - 46. Would you rather be by yourself than with the other kids?
 - 47. Are you afraid a lot?
 - 48. Are you always dropping or breaking things?
 - 49. Are you different from other people?
 - 50. Do you think bad thoughts?
-

Positive scoring responses by item number:

1. N	11. N	21. Y	31. N	41. N
2. Y	12. Y	22. N	32. N	42. N
3. N	13. Y	23. Y	33. N	43. N
4. N	14. Y	24. Y	34. N	44. N
5. Y	15. Y	25. N	35. Y	45. Y
6. N	16. N	26. N	36. Y	46. N
7. Y	17. N	27. Y	37. N	47. N
8. Y	18. N	28. N	38. Y	48. N
9. Y	19. N	29. Y	39. N	49. N
10. N	20. N	30. Y	40. Y	50. N

* Items dropped from pretest item pool.

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