

SOCIAL STATUS AND THE PERSONALITY ADJUSTMENT OF THE CHILD¹

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(Reprinted from SOCIOLOGY, Vol. 19, No. 2, June, 1956)

Over the years there has been a great deal of interest in the influence of social status on personality. This has led to a considerable body of published research (1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36, 37, 45, 48, 50, 52, 53, 55, 57, 60, 61, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 74). The results of most of the more rigorous studies were evaluated by Auld in 1952 (2). In this evaluation three criteria were established to determine the adequacy of the studies to provide warranted conclusions concerning the influence of status on personality. These were: 1. that status be measured by the use of an acceptable measure, 2. that the sample represent a wide range of status, and 3. that a stable measured relationship be found between status and one or more of the existing objective tests of personality. Most of the researches examined were found to be deficient in one or more of these aspects, but those meeting the minimum standards generally concluded that there was a low but positive relationship between status and measured personality adjustment. It was particularly clear that the personality test performance of middle-class children was significantly higher than that of lower-class children (1, 4, 34, 45, 50, 66, 67, 74).

The present writers have examined these studies, and a number of others not included in the review, and believe that no sufficiently rigorously designed research has yet been reported to warrant the conclusion that the relationship between status and personality adjustment has been clearly established. The particular weaknesses found, even in the studies which meet Auld's criteria, are two: 1. failure to control the personality adjustment effects of variables known to be correlated with status, and 2. failure to test the relationship in samples drawn to represent the full range of status levels in a relatively homogeneous and definable social system. Thus, some studies have been based on comparisons between one of the lower and one of the higher status groups in a community, or between persons of low status in a minority group and high status persons in the dominant ethnic group, or even between a low status group in one community and a high status group in another community. Obviously, comparisons of these kinds tend to exaggerate any possible existing relationships.

The aim of the present study is to test the hypothesis of a relationship between status and measured personality adjustment in a research context which satisfies not only Auld's conditions but also the conditions reflected in the above criticisms. In the opinion of the writers, the fulfillment of these conditions provides an appropriate test of the hypothesis. The statistical hypothesis tested is: In a culturally homogeneous social system there is no significant correlation between the social status of the child's family and his measured personality adjustment when their mutual relationship to selected variables is controlled. If the null hypothesis is found to be correct, it may be concluded that there probably is no fundamental relationship between status and measured personality adjustment. If the contrary occurs, it may be concluded that there probably is a true relationship between the two variables and the sources, dimensions, and consequences of this relationship may be explored with profit.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The social system under investigation is a Wisconsin community which is composed of a small urban center (Richland Center, population approximately 5,000) and its satellite rural-nonfarm and farm populations, the outer limits of which are adequately described by the legal boundaries of Richland County. The community is primarily Old American in ethnic background. Its main industry is farming, centered around dairying, and most of its population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. However, there is a full range of occupations to be found in the community, reflecting the diversity of status levels in the social system. The community is relatively isolated from any large urban concentration, which fact helps to maintain its cultural homogeneity.

The subjects selected for study are all of the children of the fourth through the eighth grades, in both the public and the parochial schools. The decision to use the school population was dictated by the need for a group upon which testing was practicable. In all, 1,462 children were included in the study.

The data gathered on each child are of three types: 1. scores on The California Test of Personality--Elementary, Form A (70), 2. scores on The New California Test of Mental Maturity--Elementary 47-S Form (71), and 3. information from a family background questionnaire which was filled out by the teachers from school records and from personal knowledge of the families.

The dependent variable of the study was taken from the test of personality adjustment. Specifically, the twelve subtests of which the test is composed were intercorrelated and the first principal component, extracted by the Hotelling method (38), was indexed following Hagood and Price (29). Only the factor-weighted total score (which, incidentally, correlates very highly with the unweighted score) was used as the dependent variable. It is called the "personality adjustment score." Thus, the internal factorial analysis of the test must be taken along with the item analysis (performed by the California Test Bureau) and the general acceptance of the test in the literature as evidence of its validity (7, 39, 40, 72).

The independent variables of the study are, of course, status factors. The child's father's occupational rating and the prestige rating of the child's family in the community were selected as status indicators. Both were taken from the family background questionnaires filled out by the teachers. The occupations of the fathers were coded using a six-point scale based on the Sewell-Ellenbogen modification of Edwards' socioeconomic classification of occupations (20, 63). The prestige rating of the child's family in the community was coded into one of five ranked categories. These were given values of one through five. Each of the two status variables was treated separately in the analysis due to their relatively low correlation ($r = +.32$) and in order to assess their individual contributions to the measured personality adjustment variation.

These two indicators are among the most commonly accepted criteria of social status. Evidence from a number of studies indicates that occupational position correlates highly with several other indexes of status, and social scientists generally have been willing to accept it as a valid measure of status (8, 18, 19, 30, 41). Prestige ratings of the family have been widely used to tap another important dimension of status--particularly in studies of smaller communities where the prestige position of the family is generally known and is very important in local affairs (18, 19, 42, 43, 62, 73).

Table 1 presents the specific breakdown of the two dimensions. While the status extremes are by no means striking, it is evident that the requirement of a wide status range is met by these data. Children of local business and professional families are present in sizeable numbers, the highest stratum, and those of relatively unskilled laborers are present in appreciable numbers, the two lower strata. A similar situation obtains in the family prestige dimension: sizeable numbers of children from families of all prestige levels are present.

The final condition for a rigorous test of the hypothesis of no association between measured personality adjustment and status is the control of variables related to status which, if also related to adjustment, might spuriously increase the apparent relationship between adjustment and status. Three such control variables were selected. They are the number of siblings in the child's family, the child's chronological age, and the child's intelligence quotient. These were chosen because there are either theoretical or practical reasons for believing that each is related to status and to personality adjustment. The size of the child's sibgroup was selected due to its often hypothesized relationship to adjustment and its known relationship to status (3, 12, 16, 21, 33, 46, 54, 56). The chronological age of the child was selected because it was found to be related to adjustment (see Table 2) and because it was reasoned that low status children are more likely to be older due to failing grades than are high status children. Intelligence was selected because it was found to be associated with adjustment (see Table 2) and because it is known to be related to status (6, 11, 17, 28, 31, 47, 58, 59, 63, 69). Other variables might have been selected, yet the control of these three provides a more thorough test of the hypothesis than has been possible to date.

In the ensuing analysis the following symbols will be used to identify the variables: X_1 --the child's personality adjustment score; X_2 --the child's father's occupational rating; X_3 --the prestige position of the child's family in the community; X_4 --the number of children in the child's family; X_5 --the child's age in months; and X_6 --the child's intelligence quotient. Again, X_1 is the dependent variable, X_2 and X_3 are the independent variables, and X_4 , X_5 and X_6 are the control variables.

RESULTS

The hypothesis of no relationship between status and measured personality adjustment was tested in two phases. The first phase concerns the zero-order correlation and the first-order multiple correlation between the two status variables and measured personality adjustment. The second phase concerns the controlled analysis.²

The zero-order correlations of the status variables with the index of personality adjustment were found to be positive. As Table 2 shows, these are $r_{12} = +.159$ and $r_{13} = +.231$. Furthermore, given the size of the sample, the correlation coefficients are large enough to be significant beyond the .001 level (the child's personality adjustment score, X_1 , and child's father's occupational rating, X_2 : $F_{0(1,\infty)} = 34.90 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.001 = 10.83$; the child's personality score, X_1 , and the prestige position of the child's family in the community, X_3 : $F_{0(1,\infty)} = 79.81 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.001 = 10.83$) (51). This evidence of a significant and positive zero-order relationship of status to measured personality adjustment is in agreement with previous research. It will be noticed, however, that the amount of relationship, as measured by the zero-order correlation coefficients, is low ($r_{12} = +.159$ and $r_{13} = +.231$). The first-order multiple effects of the two status variables, X_2 and X_3 , on personality adjustment, X_1 , are also low ($R_{1.23} = +.249$). This finding may indicate that status is not as important an influence upon measured personality adjustment as has been assumed in much of the social-psychological literature (14, 15, 22, 32, 49). Nevertheless, the correlation coefficients clearly demonstrate that status and the index of personality adjustment are significantly related when the influence of non-status variables is not controlled.

The controlled test of the hypothesis, carried out by means of a multiple correlation analysis, is more complex (23, 29, 51). If the variables that have been found to be related to measured personality adjustment and status, but which are neither personality adjustment nor status in themselves, could be shown to account for their apparent relationship, then it could be concluded that the observed relationship is spurious. The test was made by comparing the personality adjustment score (X_1) variance accounted for by the combined effects of the child's father's occupational rating (X_2), the prestige position of the child's family in the community (X_3), and all control variables (X_4 , X_5 and X_6), with the personality adjustment score (X_1) variance accounted for by the control variables (X_4 , X_5 and X_6)

alone. If the control variables alone could account for an amount of variance not significantly different from the amount accounted for by all variables, then the hypothesis of no relationship would be accepted. In the present study, $R_{1.23456}^2 = .098$, while $R_{1.456}^2 = .052$. The difference between these two variances yields an F ratio significant beyond the .001 level ($F_{0(2,\infty)} = 21.93 > F_t(2,\infty) \cdot 001 = 6.91$) (44). Thus, it is clear that the control of sib-group size, chronological age, and intelligence does not account for enough of the measured personality adjustment variance associated with the status variables to require accepting the hypothesis of no relationship.³ Therefore, it is concluded that in the group studied the measured personality adjustment of the child must be at least in part a function of the social status of his family.

DISCUSSION

From the results of this study it is clear that in the culturally homogeneous community in which this research was conducted there is a significant relationship between the social status of the child's family and his measured personality adjustment. This relationship is maintained even when variables known to be related either to status or personality or both are controlled. However, the magnitude of the relationship is so small that it contributes relatively little to the explanation of the variance in measured personality found in this group of school children. If this is an accurate estimate of the amount of relationship to be found in other samples, the conclusion would be that the general importance of status to personality is not as great as has been commonly assumed.

The writers are not ready to take this unequivocal position even though most of the evidence in the literature leads to the same conclusion (5, 26, 57, 66, 74). This is because it is felt that the tests made may understate the relationship for other populations. It is entirely possible that in more complex social systems than those studied so far, with greater differences in social strata and with more definite stratification systems, social status may produce more marked effects on measured personality adjustment than have been found to date. Moreover, it is possible that the effects of status on personality adjustment may be more marked in other age groups than the one included in this study--particularly adolescents. Finally, it must be pointed out too that the measures used for assessing both status and personality adjustment in this and other quantitative studies are at best crude and, consequently, the correlations found may understate the relationship between status and personality adjustment. However, this question can only be answered by field studies using better measures than those available for use in the present investigation. In any event, in light of the low correlations found in this and previously published studies, it would seem advisable for social scientists to pursue research into the nature and extent of this relationship in other social systems before making any sweeping generalization about the importance of social status to personality adjustment.⁴

SUMMARY

A test was made of the hypothesis that in a culturally homogeneous social system there is no significant correlation between the social status of the child's family and his measured personality adjustment when their mutual relationship to selected variables is controlled. The study was conducted in a Wisconsin community which was shown to be culturally homogeneous but to have a wide range of status levels. All children in grades four through eight in the community were included in the study. The dependent variable of the study was X_1 --the child's personality adjustment score as measured by a factor-weighted test of personality. The independent variables were two indicators of social status: X_2 --the child's father's occupational rating, and X_3 --prestige rating of the child's family in the community. The control variables were: X_4 --the number of siblings in the child's family, X_5 --the child's chronological age, and X_6 --the child's intelligence quotient. Zero-order correlations between the two status measures and measured personality adjustment were found to be low but positive and significant. When the effects of the remaining variables were controlled, there was still a low positive but significant relation between the status variables and measured personality adjustment. Therefore the hypothesis of no relationship was rejected. It was pointed out that the results of the present study may understate the degree of the relationship which exists in the group studied because of the crudeness of the available measurements. It was also indicated that the relationship between the status of the child's family and his measured personality may be greater in communities in which there is less cultural homogeneity and a broader and more complex stratification system. However, it was argued that carefully designed research in other social systems should be undertaken before further generalizations are made about the importance of social status to personality adjustment.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The writers wish to acknowledge the assistance of Masako Yamada, and the cooperation of the Numerical Analysis Laboratory of the University of Wisconsin and personnel of the Richland County, Wisconsin, school systems. The research reported in this paper is part of a larger project under the direction of William H. Sewell, which is supported by the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Research Committee of the University of Wisconsin.
2. The statistical techniques used in the study are based upon assumptions about the nature of the data. Specifically, the variables should be quantitative, normally distributed, homoscedastic, and have a linear relationship to each other. As is generally the case in research, none of these is perfectly met. Nevertheless, the authors believe that the data are close enough to the assumptions of the techniques to be applicable in this instance.

3. The zero-order personality adjustment effects of each status variable were compared with the combined effects of both in order to discover whether the variance apparently due to both could be shown to be due to only one. (1) $R_{1.23}^2 = r_{12}^2 : F_{o(1,\infty)} = 52.15 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.001 = 10.83$. (2) $R_{1.23}^2 = r_{13}^2 : F_{o(1,\infty)} = 12.68 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.001 = 10.83$. Similarly, when the control variables are added, (3) $R_{1.23456}^2 = R_{1.2456}^2 : F_{o(1,\infty)} = 40.94 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.001 = 10.83$; and (4) $R_{1.23456}^2 = R_{1.3456}^2 : F_{o(1,\infty)} = 7.31 > F_{t(1,\infty)}.01 = 6.64$. Thus, each status variable makes a somewhat unique contribution to the explanation of the personality adjustment score variance.

4. Further analysis of the data used in the present study suggests that at least part of the relationship of personality adjustment to status is due to the lower status child's perception of his low status and the consequent development of a personality maladjustment factor tentatively identified as status anxiety. (It is anticipated that the results of this study will be published in full at a later date.)

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TABLE 1

Social Status of Children*

Status Variable	Status Position	Percent
A. Child's Father's Occupational Rating	I. Business owners and professional persons	9.5
	II. White collar workers, clerical workers, and skilled tradesmen	14.5
	III. Farm owners	38.6
	IV. Farm tenants	20.3
	V. Semi-skilled and unskilled workers	15.5
	VI. Farm laborers	1.6
	Total	100.0
B. Prestige Rating of the Child's Family in the Community	I. High	10.9
	II. Medium high	15.9
	III. Average	57.8
	IV. Medium low	12.4
	V. Low	2.9
	Total	99.9

*Number of subjects: 1462.

TABLE 2

Zero-Order Correlation Coefficients*

	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆
X ₁	--	+.159	+.231	-.118	+.121	+.124
X ₂	+.159	--	+.318	-.167	-.044	+.169
X ₃	+.231	+.318	--	-.208	-.032	+.134
X ₄	-.118	-.167	-.208	--	+.140	-.083
X ₅	+.121	-.044	-.032	+.140	--	-.224
X ₆	+.124	+.169	+.134	-.083	-.224	--

* $r \geq \pm .06 = P \leq .05$.

X₁: Child's personality adjustment score

X₄: Number of siblings in child's family

X₂: Child's father's occupational rating

X₅: Child's chronological age

X₃: Prestige status of the child's family in the community

X₆: Child's intelligence quotient