A STUDY OF THE PERSONALITIES OF GIFTED STUDENTS BY MEANS OF THE CONTROL GROUP*

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IN THE year 1927-1928, there was conducted at a High School in Brooklyn, N.Y., an investigation into the lives of 128 intellectually gifted students. For purposes of the study, students possessed of 130 I.Q. or above who were failing or had failed two or more major high school subjects, such as Latin, science or mathematics, were considered to be "problem" students. Sixty-seven students in the school that year were found to be classifiable under this narrow definition of "problem child." From the remaining students in the school attaining at least 130 I.Q., but not failing in school work, a comparable group was chosen, the groups being exactly matched for I.Q. and sex. The unadjusted group as finally constituted comprised sixty-one students ranging in I.Q. from 130 to 163, mean at 135.61, and the adjusted group, sixty-seven students ranging in I.Q. from 130 to 157, mean at 135.0. The disparity in the final numbers is due to the withdrawal of some failing students from school. Twenty percent of the adjusted students failed one subject; eighty percent of them failed no high school subjects. The unadjusted students failed anywhere from two to forty-three subjects, few at the lower limit and the mean at almost four subjects, representing an average retardation of six months in the high school career. In the year of the study, forty-seven or seventy-seven percent of the unadjusted students were subsequently reported to the Welfare office for familiar problem difficulties—stealing, lying, masturbation, truancy. Only one student from the adjusted group was so reported, the attention of the Welfare director being called to the fact that the student was severely handicapped by asthma. We have, then, before us two groups of high school students both possessed of the same mental ability, and that high enough for reasonable success with the high school curriculum. The groups produce a disparate performance. If we subject the total number to the clinical procedure usually employed in the case of the problem child, can we discover the concomitants of success in the one group and failure in the other? The hope of clear-cut, black or white, yea or nay distinctions is tantalizing.

* Presented at the 1930 meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association.
It is necessary for us to have in mind certain general characteristics of these students. The adjusted group is composed of forty-eight boys and nineteen girls; the unadjusted, of forty-five boys and sixteen girls. The ages range from eleven to sixteen years, the mean for both groups being 13.9 years. All but one of the students were born in the United States; the one was born in Canada. Eighty-five percent of the total group were born and nurtured in New York City. Eighty-two percent of the parents were born abroad. Twenty-eight percent of the parents are of American stock, sixty-two percent are Jewish, and the remaining ten percent represent mixed nationalities. We are, therefore, dealing largely with a first generation immigrant group. In the group as a whole, nineteen were only children, forty-one came from families where there was one sibling, twenty-eight from families where there were two, nineteen from families where there were three, twelve from families where there were four, two from families where there were five, three from families where there were six, two from families where there were seven, one from a family where there were nine and one from a family where there were ten. In the adjusted group, eighteen percent were only children; in the unadjusted, eleven percent. In the adjusted group, thirty-one percent were oldest children; in the unadjusted, thirty percent. In the adjusted group, twenty-seven percent were youngest children; in the unadjusted group, twenty-three percent were youngest children. The groups include four pairs of siblings; one brother and sister, both 134 I.Q., the sister, who is older, adjusted, and the brother, not; two brothers both adjusted; two brothers, both unadjusted, the older the more severe problem by any definition, and two brothers, both unadjusted, the younger the more severe problem by any definition. The mean number of siblings for the total group, is 2.07. Atypical family conditions, such as separated parents, stepmothers and so on characterize ten of the adjusted students, fourteen of the unadjusted. The groups are found on the same economic levels, the range of weekly income for the adjusted group extending from $22 to $962, with the mean at $97.78; for the unadjusted group, the range is from $25 to $577, with the mean at $117.44. Data on the family histories of these two groups indicate no marked differentiation of them in respect to the items of family history that are of immediate concern to the psychiatrist. Virtually the same percent-
age of thumb-sucking, enuresis, temper tantrums, fears, unusual sex interests, and so on is found in the adjusted as in the unadjusted group. So far, exploration of the data, far too voluminous to be presented here, reveals no significant differences between the groups in the matter of general background or of physical equipment.

The subjects were put through the paces of many psychological tests, language and non-language, of endless interviews and questionnaires. The same trained social worker visited all the homes and brought in the social histories. Uniform physical examinations and anthropometrics were arranged at the school. The students themselves kept diaries, wrote life histories, drifted in to discuss problems and ask advice. The same psychiatrist saw the whole group under conditions prescribed by him. Now, surely, out of this wealth of data, there must emerge the true inwardness of maladjustment, the *sine qua non*!

We shall have time here to glimpse only three of the excursions into personality study—the reports of the psychiatrist, a portion of the questionnaire on sex matters, and the life histories written by the subjects themselves. The psychiatrist stipulated the kind of material he would have to have in advance of his interview with the child—the estimates of the teachers, the home background, findings on the school physical examinations, and the child’s interests and activities. A similar pattern was used in the examiner’s interview that elicited this material and the form in which it reached the psychiatrist was uniform. The psychiatrist was given the names of the two subjects in which the student had received the highest ratings and the two in which he had received the lowest marks. The children were presented to the psychiatrist in random order and it was not known to him which of the students were considered unadjusted. At the close of each preliminary interview, the examiner explained to the child that people interested in research always had to check on their findings. It was explained that the examiner had, of course, certain impressions of their personalities, but it was necessary to have another person see them who might perhaps have a different viewpoint. It was made clear that the next interviewer was a physician who would ask them questions about themselves, perhaps very intimate questions because he, too, was trying to understand them. The psychiatrist reported that the group met him with exceptional poise and willingness to co-operate.
The psychiatrist found nineteen percent of the adjusted students normal and wholesome; thirty-one percent of the unadjusted. It was mentioned that fourteen of the unadjusted were known to the examiner for school failure only; the psychiatrist found eight of these normal and wholesome, six manifesting symptoms of a "problem" character. In the adjusted group, three admit the practice of masturbation, now discontinued; nine admit current practice of masturbation; none admit overt sex behavior. In the unadjusted group, four admit having masturbated, but discontinued the practice; seven admit masturbating now; one admits overt sex behavior; two subjects deny masturbation but the psychiatrist does not believe them. Twenty-seven percent of the adjusted are found emotionally and physically immature; thirty-eight percent of the unadjusted. Twenty-eight percent of the adjusted are cited by the psychiatrist as having physical handicaps; thirty-three percent of the unadjusted. Only three percent of the adjusted are found to have endocrine disorders; eighteen percent of the unadjusted. Thirty-four of the adjusted students, or fifty-one percent, are found to have mental difficulties that hamper adequate social adjustment; thirty-five or fifty-seven percent of the unadjusted are so afflicted. Twenty-two percent of the cases of unfortunate mental trend among the adjusted are potentially serious, that is, the psychiatrist definitely states that the student needs mental hygiene guidance or he predicts a mental breakdown. Thirty-eight percent of the unadjusted are handicapped in the same manner. It is important to notice the overlapping and to perceive that the emphasis on the unadjusted, except perhaps with reference to the few cases of endocrine disorders, is nowhere very positive.

The questionnaire on sex was answered in the office of the examiner and so far as the student knew, it was anonymous. The questionnaire is selected for presentation from among a number because there will probably be general agreement that sex matters constitute one aspect of life in which problems are likely to arise. One Italian girl appears genuinely to have no sex information at the time of examination, but she is the only one of the group of whom that can be said. Forty-six percent of the adjusted are equipped with sex information that is inadequate because it is untruthful; thirty-nine percent of the unadjusted are so equipped. Thirty-nine percent of the students in each group
report having been bothered by the sex information they have acquired. Twenty-five percent of the adjusted report a practice of masturbation, now discontinued; forty-one percent of the unadjusted report such a practice. Sixteen percent of the adjusted report masturbation at present being practised; eleven percent of the unadjusted. Nine percent of the adjusted have had overt sex experiences including one case of rape and one of homosexual behavior; eleven percent of the unadjusted report overt sex behavior. The questionnaires, answered by the students in writing, uncover a great deal more data in this field than do the psychiatric interviews.

The life histories were written after the Kreuger outline, the same directions having been given to all subjects. These documents reveal difficulties borne by the subjects and not exposed to view by any other stimuli presented to them. Fifty-four percent of the adjusted and fifty-nine percent of the unadjusted mention in these intimate confessions problems familiar to all psychiatrists—separated parents and the divided loyalty experienced by the child, smarting under the altered economic circumstances of the family, sensitivity over inadequate physique or beauty, and the like. Time does not permit us to exhaust the complete array of these problems in both groups. It was pointed out that none of the sixty-seven adjusted students constituted school problems and only two were subsequently reported as home problems. So far as the eye can perceive, they are adjusted functioning personalities. In the study of behavior, we have tended to explain maladjustment by the presence in a life of certain recognizable symptoms usually indicative of mental conflict. If we know anything about behavior, we should be equally able to explain adjustment in the presence of the same symptoms we have seized upon to account for maladaptation. In our adjusted group, here is a boy brooding upon his altered opinion of his mother now that he knows his father is not dead and the married chauffeur who lives in the home is definitely his mother’s lover. Here is a girl who was raped, and in the same year, the year of the menstrual onset, saw a man expose himself in the movies. Here is a boy whose psychotic mother attempted to poison the whole family and to take her own life. Here is a girl whose father died when she was twelve, as a result of which she had morbid fears of death that occasioned sleeplessness and
fright for almost a year; the same girl has had illicit sex relations with her violin teacher. Another boy reports long spells of sleeplessness over the quarrels of his father and mother, now separated; he had illicit sex relations with his cousin when he was thirteen. Another grieves over his father, dead these eleven years, and although the father is never mentioned in the home, the boy carries his photograph secretly, and weeps over it periodically. Why, in the face of these facts, and others like them, are the adjusted adjusted?

We are far from a black or white, yea or nay answer to the riddle. Still, the results are challenging. At least if the bright array of items which some of us have rashly nominated "causal" or "symptomatic" occurs to an equal extent in adjusted and un-adjusted personalities, we must be more cautious in statement. Perhaps since a little more than fifty percent of both groups exhibit behavior at which we have been looking askance, we have been on a wrong scent; perhaps that is normal behavior. In this study, the questionnaires, documents, family histories and psychiatric techniques have not differentiated the groups in any significant ways. These are, then, scarcely sharp and dependable tools for finding what is relevant when human behavior goes wrong. There must be still more significant phenomena in this field which our present instruments have never brought into focus.

Research is not postulated upon any preconceived notion of how or why human beings are maladjusted. It proceeds rather on the scientific plan of discovering the facts by all the known techniques, and by comparing an experimental with a control group. The results here certainly give us no smug satisfaction about having discovered the pertinent and important in behavior. What we need are endless series of studies by means of the control group; by no other means can we discover what is normal from which abnormal is the departure. We can make no progress toward predicting and controlling behavior, and this is the factor on which all preventive programs must rest, until we know what differentiates adjustment from maladjustment. The method of the control group, disheartening as it appears in this instance, beckons us along this alluring trail.