ISOLATION AS A CHARACTERISTIC OF HIGHLY GIFTED CHILDREN

Paul M. Sheldon

The tendency of highly intelligent children to become isolated has been suggested by Hollingworth\(^1\), Terman, and others. Several years ago\(^2\) an intensive exploratory study of children who had achieved an IQ of 170 or higher on the Stanford-Binet Scale was made at New York University's Counseling Center for Gifted Children. The subjects comprised all of the children in this category under the age of twelve\(^3\) who could be located in the New York area. Sources of information included the files of the Center, the records of the New York City Board of Education Psychological Clinic, and the records of the large public elementary school which admitted students on the basis of high intelligence test scores. Twenty-eight subjects were involved. It was possible to study 24 of them intensively.

Answers were sought to these two questions:

1. To what extent do these children feel themselves to be isolated?
2. To what extent do their peers and adult observers consider them to be isolated?

Instruments used for this purpose included the Rorschach Technique of Personality Diagnosis; psychiatric interviews; sociometric studies; the California Test of Personality; the Haggerty-Olson-Wickman Behavior Rating Scale; and statements and observations by teachers, parents, and trained interviewers.

1. Feelings of Isolation as Interpreted by Rorschach Analysts and Psychiatrists

FINISHING FROM RORSCHACH EXAMINATIONS

The Rorschach cards were administered to each of the 28 sub-


\(^2\) This study was made from 1947-1951, but the results have been withheld for ethical and legal reasons. The existence of the aggregate of subjects was well known and some of the individuals were identifiable.

\(^3\) Children 12 years of age and older in this intelligence range cannot be measured adequately on standardized tests. They tend to "go through the ceiling."
jects, and their reactions were recorded. Exploratory interviews were held after each examination.

The overall impression obtained from the subjects' responses was that, with two exceptions, these children indicated a high degree of constriction. The examiner found only two subjects whose responses were creative, original, and free. Twenty respondents fell into a middle range which was described as normal, but with indications of confusion, pressure, feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, or loneliness.4

Two of the subjects who made the best impression on teachers and other observers gave Rorschach responses indicating severe internal cost for exterior social conformity.

Six of the subjects presented neurotic or schizoid patterns.

**Table I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Free, Original, Healthy, Creative</th>
<th>Feelings of Inferiority or of Peculiarity, or Constrictive</th>
<th>Neurotic in Need of Therapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS OF EXPLORATORY PSYCHIATRIC INTERVIEWS**

Psychiatric interviews were arranged for 21 of the 28 subjects. These were conducted by two staff psychiatrists at Bellevue Hospital, one of whom was the director of the children's psychiatric ward.

The findings indicated that six of the subjects were "comfortably adjusted." These include the two subjects found by the Rorschach examinations to be most healthy; and four whom the Rorschach findings indicated as being normal but having problems.

Eleven were found to be within the normal range, i.e., having some feelings of inferiority, neglect, loneliness, anxiety, and rejection, but having sufficient internal resources to handle their problems.

Four could be diagnosed as being neurotic or in need of psychiatric help. These four were among those whose Rorschach responses indicated severe disturbances. Although the Rorschach examination included more subjects, the findings of the two examinations were generally consistent.

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4 On the California Test of Personality, twelve of the respondents gave answers which placed them in the lowest quartile in feelings of personal freedom.
TABLE II
PSYCHIATRIC FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comfortably Adjusted</th>
<th>Normal but with Pressures</th>
<th>Neurotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 21

The psychiatrists and the Rorschach examiner indicated that the causes of disturbances in these subjects were not necessarily related to their high intelligence.

Of the 28 subjects, 15 knew their approximate intelligence level. Six of these seemed to get some constructive satisfaction from the knowledge and to use it in their vocational planning.

SUMMARY OF SUBJECTIVE FINDINGS

The description of a self-definition of isolation is difficult to agree on. For the purposes of this study, it was decided that, when a subject spoke of, or the preponderance of the material indicated that he felt himself to be isolated, rejected by parents, teachers, and peers; or that he was odd, peculiar, constantly lonely, or queer, he could be said to feel isolated.

The evidence from interviews with subjects, Rorschach and psychiatric interviews, and answers on pencil and paper tests indicated that, of the 28 subjects, fifteen felt themselves to be isolated.

2. Attitudes and Opinions of Others

SOLITARY PLAY

The nature of a child's play has frequently been used as an index of isolation. Summary of data obtained from subjects, parents, teachers, and other observers indicated that, among the present aggregate, 21 of the subjects nearly always played alone; six, often; one, seldom.

TABLE III
SOLITARY PLAY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nearly Always Plays Alone</th>
<th>Often Plays Alone</th>
<th>Seldom Plays Alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 28

IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

In the course of extended family interviews, all parents were asked about imaginary companions. Hollingworth had pointed out earlier\(^5\)

that "the imaginary playmate as a solution of the problem of loneliness is fairly frequent."

Of the 28 subjects, only three were described as having had imaginary human playmates; two had had imaginary dogs. None of these had siblings near their own age, or dogs; nor was there evidence of a close relationship with any adult.

**Table IV**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imaginary Companions</th>
<th>None Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 28

**SOCIOMETRY**

Twelve of the subjects were included in a sociometric investigation (which was being carried on concurrently with this study), to test the amount of social interaction, both in acceptance and rejection, within public school classes. Sociometric findings are based on student responses to questions concerning students whom they would choose or reject as companions in three school activities.

Of the twelve subjects included, three were placed in the lowest quartile; four were in the second quartile; five were in the third quartile; and none in the top quartile. The significance of this data is colored by the fact that all but two of the subjects attended the segregated elementary school where the lowest I.Q. in each class tended to be between 130 and 140.

**Table V**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
<th>Top</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 12 (Students in HCES—Material taken from another study Data not available on other subjects.)

**HAGGERTY-OLSON-WICKMAN BEHAVIOR RATING SCALES**

The authors of these scales do not suggest norms, but provide a check list of traits by which teachers can describe their pupils. The list is divided into two scales: Behavior Problem Record, and Behavior Rating Scale.

On this two-part scale, three of the subjects were given 0, meaning that, in the opinion of the teachers, they had no acute behavior
problems. Fifteen were rated as being socially unpopular with the other students; eleven as "disinterested in school work"; ten as having occasional temper tantrums; and eleven "overactive." There was an overlap, since several of these traits might be found in a single child.

**Table VI**

**BEHAVIOR RATING SCALES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unpopular</th>
<th>Disinterested</th>
<th>Temper Tantrums</th>
<th>Overactive</th>
<th>No Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 27
Total Responses = 49 (Several traits were assigned to a single child)

**TEACHER INTERVIEWS**

In addition to the Haggerty- Olson-Wickman Scales, personal interviews were held by field workers with the teachers of 24 subjects. One purpose of these interviews was to get the teachers' judgments regarding the attitudes of other children toward the subjects.

The teachers reported that six of the subjects were disliked; that two of the six were unpopular but not isolated; that classmates were willing to include fourteen of the subjects in their activities; and that four were well liked by their classmates. There was a strong overlap but not complete correlation with the findings of the psychiatric and Rorschach examinations.

**Table VII**

**TEACHER OPINIONS ON POPULARITY OF SUBJECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disliked</th>
<th>Accepted</th>
<th>Well-Liked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 24

The field workers also inquired into the attitudes of the teachers themselves toward the subjects. Only four were actively disliked by their teachers. Nine were casually accepted; and eleven were well liked. The four subjects disliked were among the six found by the Rorschach examinations to exhibit neurotic patterns.

**Table VIII**

**TEACHERS' REACTIONS TO SUBJECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disliked</th>
<th>Accepted</th>
<th>Well-Liked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 24
ATTITUDES OF PEERS

On the basis of sociometric studies, classroom observation by field workers, interviews with teachers and students, and the Hag-gerty-Olson-Wickman Scales, it was found that, of the 28 subjects, three were popular with their classmates; nineteen were accepted; and six were rejected by their classmates and by other children. There was a positive correlation between rejection by classmates and the Rorschach findings of neurotic patterns.

TABLE IX
ATTITUDES OF PEERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rejected</th>
<th>Accepted</th>
<th>Popular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 28

SUMMARY

An unexpected finding was the high evidence (in more than half of the subjects) of apparently deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence.

Results of the investigation indicate a need to revise the theory of isolation as a necessary function of high intelligence. Of the 28 subjects studied, six were comfortably-adjusted by psychiatric judgment; three were popular with their peers in unsegregated schools; two gave Rorschach responses indicating a high degree of spontaneity, creativity, freedom of association, and freedom of interplay. One adolescent had been markedly gregarious from early childhood. While the early childhood play of three quarters of the subjects was nearly always solitary, the significance of this finding was minimized by a number of factors, such as the pattern of New York urban living. Social contacts tended to increase as the children became older.

While fifteen indicated personal feelings of isolation or rejection, in only six cases was this feeling borne out by the objective judgment of peers, teachers, and other observers.

It may be concluded that:

1. High intelligence in and of itself is not a sufficient cause for subjective or objective isolation, although it may be one contributing factor.

2. Further research is needed into the discrepancy between isola-tion as felt by the subject in defining his own role; and the
opinions held of him by his peers. With the exception of strongly neurotic or schizoid subjects, classmates appeared ready to include these superdeviates in their activities.

3. It may be that the isolation previously considered to be a characteristic of highly gifted children is not a necessary component of their intellectual level; but rather is due to factors in the dynamics of roles played in the family and the school. Since so little research has been done in this field, and since the present study indicated a consistent pattern of pressure, there appears to be a need for further investigation to determine whether the pattern of isolation is an evidence of difficulties associated with but not necessarily a part of high intelligence.

At the time of this study New York City had not had a complete program of individual testing of all school children, so this is to be considered as an exploratory study, with no claim to being a random sample. Since many of the subjects were found through clinics or counseling centers, there is perhaps a tendency for the sample to be weighted with subjects who had emotional problems.

Terman found among the 81 highly gifted children whom he originally studied in 1922-23 a minimum of problems in the field of personality and mental health. Since his findings were based largely on the subjective judgments of parents, medical examiners, and teachers; and since it is possible that the marked discrepancy in findings could to some extent be attributed to class and ethnic differences between the two samples, a study of a group of comparable subjects in California is indicated.

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