

Parental Criticism and the Adolescent Experience

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In a questionnaire study of 883 high school students, subjects were asked the extent to which their parents criticized them for 18 criticizable behaviors or attitudes. Over 50% of the respondents reported being criticized for being disobedient, lazy, and messy—issues central to family life. Further analyses indicated a relationship between perceived criticism and self-image. The more criticism the teenager perceived for a specific behavior or attitude (e.g., being selfish), the more likely that teenager was to perceive himself/herself as being that way. The differential impact of criticism in the context of parental rejection was also explored.

INTRODUCTION

Not the least of the tribulations of the adolescent is that of being the recipient of parental criticism. Whether or not the criticism is deserved, whether or not it is intended as constructive, the teenager—insecure enough about an emerging sense of identity—tends to take criticism as a vote of “no confidence” and to react with an admixture of resentment and depression. This reaction in many cases may be transitory, but in some instances it may be chronic and productive of emotional disturbance.

Like other familiar and common phenomena of family life which have little esoteric appeal (e.g., favoritism), parental criticism has not been the subject of systematic inquiry. The present report of a questionnaire study

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of high school students is intended to stimulate such inquiry. Based on the adolescent's perceptions of parental criticism, rather than on reports from parents on what they have found to criticize, it represents only one part of the story. Although adolescents' perceptions may not correspond with what parents or external observers might report, these perceptions do constitute subjective truth for the teenager and are most likely to impact other aspects of his or her experience.

Although parental criticism has not received much scientific attention, related phenomena and concepts continue to attract theoretical interest. If parental criticism is looked upon as emanating from the parental value system, and as stimulated by the child's variance from that value system, its relation to superego and ego-ideal formation is readily apparent. The parental do's and don'ts which find their way into these formations can be internalized in several ways. One way is through early verbalized parental disapproval, a form of parental criticism. Another way of registering disapproval is through the withholding of affection, a method which often may have more corrective effect on the child's behavior than does verbalized criticism. Parental criticism is relevant not only to the concepts of superego and ego-ideal but also to other schools of thought—*viz.*, the attitudes of the significant other in the theory of G. H. Mead (1967), the issue of unconditional acceptance in Rogerian theory (Rogers, 1961).

Although the adolescent, rather than the parent, will be the primary focus here, a few words are in order regarding parental psychology. During the adolescence of their offspring, parents are especially prone to criticize behaviors that stem from the teenager's striving for independence and unique identity. In the earlier years of the offspring's childhood, parents could count on the influence of their guidance and on the plasticity of their children's personalities to improve certain lacks and to smooth certain crudities. During adolescence, however, children are coming to have minds of their own and to hearken to the values of their peers. Parents, anxious about the teenager's ability to cope independently and/or themselves narcissistically wounded because the teenager has not blossomed as desired, may tend to increase the range and frequency of their critical admonitions.

Our questionnaire study of 883 high school students provided a variety of data concerning parental criticism. First, it afforded a normative view of how often the respondents felt that they were criticized for 18 criticizable behaviors or attitudes (e.g., lazy, selfish, disrespectful). Next, it allowed a view of what specific criticisms were associated with an increased feeling of not being accepted by the parent ("How much does your father (mother) accept you the way you are?"). Certain criticisms were linked to unacceptability by both parents, other criticisms held for mother or father, and still others held only for boys or only for girls. Other questions' responses

provided a view of how much the specific parental criticism—as well as the total weight of parental criticism—was reflected in the teenager's self-image and preferred social image.

RESULTS

The questionnaire, description of the sample, procedures of administration, and scoring system have been described elsewhere (Harris and Howard, 1979). Briefly, the questionnaire contained 241 multiple-choice items surveying personal adjustment, political-social-personal values and attitudes, and perceptions of parents. The sections have been factor analyzed and yield 22 scores. The 883 subjects ranged in age from 14 to 18 and were students at four midwestern high schools—one suburban, one semi-rural, and two Catholic parochial suburban schools. Questionnaires were handed out by homeroom teachers and returned in school.

Specific Criticisms

One section of the questionnaire stated "I am (or was) criticized for being." This stem was followed by 18 common criticisms, each to be rated on a scale from "Never" to "Always." The responses to each item were dichotomized as follows: never, rarely vs. occasionally, frequently, and always. Table I shows the frequency of endorsement for boys and girls. As can be seen, both boys and girls felt that they were frequently criticized for being: "Disobedient, breaking family rules," "Lazy, not ambitious enough" and "Messy, sloppy." Boys, more often than girls, felt criticized for disobedience, not applying self, impulsivity, undesirable friends, and unsociability. Girls, more often than boys, felt criticized for being foolish, unappreciative, quarrelsome, and stubborn. Since these differences between boys and girls appear in the next section on parental rejection, we shall defer comment here.

Criticism and Parental Rejection

While the above criticisms may be frequent, they are not necessarily the most disquieting ones to the teenager. An idea of such criticisms may be gained from utilizing the responses to the questions "How much does your mother (father) accept you the way you are?" Criticisms associated

Table I. Percentage of Teenagers Who Perceived Their Parents as Critical

Criticism by parents	Girls (N = 421)	Boys (N = 462)
Disobedient, breaking family rules	53	65
Lazy, not ambitious enough	56	56
Messy, sloppy	50	51
Not appreciate what they do for you	54	46
Does not apply self to schoolwork	42	51
Stubborn, uncooperative	49	44
Inconsiderate and thoughtless	43	45
Not communicative; won't tell them [parents] what you're doing	42	42
Mean, unkind to members of family	40	39
Disrespectful, rude	34	37
Wild, too impulsive	31	37
Selfish, self-centered	32	32
Hard to get along with, quarrelsome	34	29
Having undesirable friends and companions	29	34
Foolish, no common sense	36	23
Not sociable	25	30
Immature, babyish	22	20
Not affectionate	16	20

with the perception of unacceptability are more likely to give rise to the adolescent's feeling that it is not his or her *behavior* that is in question or being rejected, but his or her *personality*.

A "parental nonacceptance" score was designed to assess the degree of parental rejection. It was created by summing the responses to the questions concerning perception of mother's acceptance and perception of father's acceptance. This score was correlated (for boys and girls, separately) with each of the 18 criticism items. For boys, the following parental criticisms were most highly correlated with parental nonacceptance: undesirable friends ($r = 0.33$), not apply self (0.30), lazy (0.28), not communicative (0.28), and not sociable (0.23). For girls, the highest correlates with parental nonacceptance were disobedient (0.37), undesirable friends (0.36), not communicative (0.36), hard to get along with (0.34), and foolish (0.34).

For both boys and girls, being criticized for having undesirable friends and for being noncommunicative were highly correlated with parental nonacceptance. This analysis does not allow any conclusions as to what is cause and what is effect. Perhaps parental nonacceptance leads to a break in parent-child rapport and communication, a break which necessitates the adolescent's seeking relationships with peers who share his or her criticizable values and behaviors. It is also possible, however, that having undesirable friends and not being communicative bring on parental nonacceptance.

As for differences between boys and girls, lack of achievement drive (not apply self, lazy) appears especially not acceptable to the parents of

boys, and lack of compliance (disobedient, hard to get along with) especially unacceptable to parents of girls. These trends are in keeping with the oft-described cultural expectations for the two sexes—males are to be successful breadwinners, females to be nonabrasive compliant nurturers.

Maternal and/or Paternal Rejection

Other analyses investigated the relationship of perceived criticism to perceived maternal and paternal nonacceptance separately. Certain criticisms were correlated with both maternal and paternal nonacceptance. Thus, for boys and girls, there were significant correlations regarding each parent for “not communicative,” “undesirable friends,” and “wild.” For boys, significantly related to nonacceptance by either parent were the criticisms “not apply self” and “lazy.” For girls there were significant correlations for “disobedient.” With regard to criticisms that correlated with only one parent’s rejection, maternal nonacceptance of sons was significantly related to the criticisms “not appreciative,” “messy,” and “not sociable”; paternal nonacceptance of daughters was related to the criticism “not affectionate.” The criticism “foolish” was significantly related to fathers’ nonacceptance of both sons and daughters.

It would appear from these trends that there are gender similarities and differences in what mothers and fathers expect from their sons and daughters. As described, sons appear to have the task of satisfying parental expectations of achievement, daughters of compliance. In addition, mothers and fathers have separate values and expectations—mothers desire their sons to be more sensitive, fathers desire their daughters to be more affectionate. Moreover, fathers find lack of common sense (foolishness) difficult to tolerate in any of their children.

Parental Criticism, Self-Image, and Social Image

The next set of analyses was concerned with the relationship of perceived parental criticism and the self-image and social image of the teenager. Self-image was investigated by utilizing responses to the question “How true about you are the following:” followed by a list of 30 negative self-statements (foolish, mean, not warm, etc.). Social image was assessed by the question “How much would it bother you if someone whose opinion you valued thought of you as:” followed by the same 30 items. The 5-point response format ranged from “not at all” to “very much.” Self-image and social-image scores were obtained by summing responses to the items in each section.

The analyses explored the relationship of total parental criticism to total negative self-image and total negative social image. Subjects were dichotomized on the basis of their total criticism scores into high and low Criticism. They were also dichotomized into high and low Parental Acceptance. Only about 8% of the subjects fell into the low Criticism—low Parental Acceptance group, so this group was not further analyzed. With regard to self-image, both boys and girls showed the same pattern. The best self-image emerged from the low Criticism—high Parental Acceptance groups, the next best from the high Criticism—high Parental Acceptance groups, and the worst from the high Criticism—low Parental Acceptance groups. With regard to social image, boys and girls differed. For boys, the greatest concern about having a negative social image was seen in the low Criticism—high Parental Acceptance group, the next in the high Criticism—high Acceptance group, and least concern in the high Criticism—low Parental Acceptance group. For girls, the high Criticism—high Parental Acceptance group was most concerned about a negative social image.

As might be expected theoretically from the concept of internalization of the attitudes of significant others, it appears that the greater the parental criticism and the lesser the parental acceptance, the more negative is the adolescent's self-image. While this holds for both sexes, concern about negative social image—a concern which affects how one behaves—appears to operate differently for boys and girls. The trend in boys suggests that unconcern about negative social image is directly related to the degree of critical nonacceptance by the parents. Girls do not seem to operate as much in this mode of “if you don't accept me and my values, then I won't accept you and your values.”

As a further investigation of internalization, we examined the congruence between criticism and self-image. Six specific parental criticisms had counterpart items regarding the teenager's self-image: lazy, selfish, quarrelsome, immature, foolish, mean. For both boys and girls, each criticism was significantly correlated with the corresponding negative self-image item. Although these correlations can be interpreted as evidence that the teenager has internalized the parental criticism, an equally possible interpretation is that the parental criticism is not the originating source of the self-image component, but a repercussion of the teenager's behavior. Further research is necessary to determine which explanation is the more valid.

Specific Criticisms and Negative Self-Image

What is the differential effect of particular parental criticisms in producing negative self-image? For example, would criticism for being “selfish” be correlated with more negative self-image items than criticism

for being "messy"? Using as a criterion a correlation of 0.15 ($p < 0.05$) or better, the data for boys indicated that the four criticisms most associated with the 30 negative self-image items were (number of correlated items ($r \geq 0.15$) in parentheses): hard to get along with (17), mean (14), foolish (13), and immature, babyish (12). For girls, the criticisms most associated with negative self-image were hard to get along with (16); not affectionate (9); and mean, inconsiderate, disrespectful, wild (7 each).

These results point to abrasive hostile interpersonal behavior on the part of the male and female adolescent as the parental criticism most associated with, if not most productive of, negative self-image. Perhaps this is due to the projective, accusatory nature of the criticism "hard to get along with." In voicing such a charge, parents usually absolve themselves of any contribution to the friction between themselves and their offspring. The point made by the criticism is that something is wrong with the adolescent, not with the parents, a wrongness that can provide fertile soil for the growth of negative self-image. The results also disclose gender differences of the kind already described. The criticisms most proliferative for boys (foolish, immature) strike at the boy's confidence that he will become an adequate, providing man; the criticisms most proliferative for girls (not affectionate, inconsiderate) impair their confidence that they will meet the cultural expectation of becoming a warm, thoughtful, nurturing woman.

DISCUSSION

The results in general do not run counter to common experience. It seems reasonable that undue criticisms by parents tend to lower the self-esteem of the child, and different cultural expectations of boys and girls render them vulnerable to different kinds of criticism. The results also indicate that it is worthwhile to differentiate parental criticism of specific behaviors from parental nonacceptance or rejection. Adolescents apparently can experience criticism without necessarily feeling that they are not accepted by their parents.

With regard to the effects of parental criticism of specific behaviors, it appears that for both boys and girls the more widespread and frequent the perceived parental criticism, the greater is the teenager's feeling of unacceptability and negative self-image (the higher also were the "emotional life depressed" and the "emotional life angry" scores). There also was a trend (more clear-cut for the male respondents) to have less concern about negative social image, about how adversely they were thought of by others. This apparent unconcern is the principal characteristic of "negative identity," a term Erikson (1959) used to describe behaviors which are diametrically op-

posite to those desired and valued by the parents. Negative identity can be understood as a repercussion of critical rejection by the parental significant other. The teenager finds that conformity with parental wishes does not lead to parental acceptance. Negative, criticizable behavior will at least gain parental attention, if not also punish the parents. There is fertile soil, here, for the growth of an adversarial posture to authority figures, a posture which, when shared with like-minded peers, is marked by a provocative heedlessness.

This lack of concern about having a negative social image has been emphasized by Wilson (1983) in his research on youthful offenders: "Chronic offenders may attach little or no importance to the loss of reputation that comes from being arrested. . . . Whereas the drinking driver, the casual tax cheat or the would-be draft evader . . . responds quickly to socially determined risks, the chronic offender seems to respond only to risks that are sufficiently great to offset the large benefits he associates with crime and the low value he assigns to having a decent reputation" (p. 86). Such may be the end result of excessive parental criticism, a feeling of "What's in a name?" and a marching off to the beat of a wrong drum. Underneath this defiant unconcern, the data suggest, is depression resulting from an internalization of this rejection.

With regard to gender differences, the findings indicate that sons are vulnerable to criticism that they are not goal oriented and achievement minded, daughters to criticism that they are not affectionate and sensitive—differences that would tend to socialize boys into becoming providers and girls into becoming homemakers. As for the parents, though they join in being critical of certain behaviors (e.g., not communicative, wild) they differ in that fathers require that neither sons nor daughters be foolish and that daughters be affectionate; mothers require that sons be sociable and not messy. The question arises as to which parent's criticism weighs more heavily on the adolescent. In this sample of middle class families, the father's good opinion is more likely to be especially desirable, for it was found (Harris and Howard, 1981) that fathers were most often perceived as the decision-making "boss." Goal-oriented themselves, fathers would tend to be impatient with offspring who do not yet have their feet firmly on the ground.

The fathers' apparent requirement of affection from daughters needs further comment. The data do not indicate whether daughters are less affectionate because fathers are less accepting, or whether fathers become less accepting because daughters have become less affectionate. If the latter is the case, it suggests that fathers may have a particular need for affection (or hero worship) from adolescent daughters, a need that the daughters may find difficult to meet. At this time in their lives, daughters are becoming interested in boyfriends and also may be wary of the incestuous undertones

in their relationship to their fathers. It further suggests that fathers may have affectionate, erotically tinged impulses toward their daughters which are most often sublimated, but which may result in overt incestuous actions. The latter suggestion has support in the frequency of father-daughter incest as compared to mother-son incest (Emslie and Rosenfeld, 1983) and the frequency of an erotic transference in male therapist-female patient situations as compared with female therapist-male patient situations (Lester, 1982).

The data trends have implications for the behavior of those whose role and function are to be evaluative and critical. The implications pertain not only to parents but also to those in a quasi-parental position—teachers, employers, therapists. As has been long known, criticism to be received well, should be performed in a setting of acceptability and directed to specific behaviors rather than to the personality or character structure of the one criticized. If one's personality is under criticism, a feeling of nonacceptability can arise, with the consequences of resistance and animosity. And it would seem advisable, in order to avoid a personality indictment, to take the behavioral errors, one by one, case by case. The statement "you did this wrong" would not produce as much resistance as "you did it wrong last time," and especially "You always do things wrong." Therapists, striving for the development of insight in their patients, may have some difficulty with this suggestion. In order to make some connection between past and present behavior, therapists tend to pile up evidence to indicate that the present episode should not be easily dismissed. Though their intention is to have the patient develop an objective view of himself or herself, patients with low self-esteem can feel that the intention is prosecutorial and will begin to resist the therapeutic process. To avoid this happening, it seems best that evaluative interventions on the part of the therapist should be postponed until the patient is reasonably confident that he or she is fundamentally accepted by the therapist.

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