

Maternal Attitudes to Child Socialization: Some Social and National Differences

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The finding of Sears, Maccoby & Levin (1957) that in the U.S.A. middle-class mothers are more permissive and less punitive in socializing their children than working-class mothers was made the basis of a similar investigation in Britain. It was found (1) that in Britain also middle-class mothers are more permissive and less punitive towards their children's unsocialized behaviour; (2) British mothers as a whole are less permissive and more punitive than American mothers.

INTRODUCTION

An important strand of evidence in our knowledge of the variables affecting the socialization of the child can be derived from the study of class differences in socializing techniques. It can be assumed, in the most general terms, that socialization is a function partly of inherited constitutional factors, and partly of environmental pressures. Hence any theory of the nature of these constitutional and environmental factors can and should be checked against social differences in them and the resultant degree of socialization which different classes attain.

The general feature of class differences in socialization which any theory of the socialization process must accommodate is that the middle class tends to be more socialized than the working class. This appears to be true both in the U.S.A. and in England. The American findings are substantial and have been summarized by Clausen (1957): 'The lower class pattern of life . . . puts a high premium on physical gratification, on free expression of aggression, on spending and sharing. Cleanliness, respect for property, sexual control, educational achievement—all are highly valued by middle class Americans—are of less importance to the lower class family.' Although far less work has been done in England it is likely that similar class differences exist; for example, delinquency is much more prevalent in the working class (Burt, 1935) and the working class is less educationally ambitious (Floud, Halsey and Martin, 1956).

A number of investigations have been carried out in an attempt to relate these class differences in socialization to differences in child-rearing practices. These studies have recently been reviewed by Bronfenbrenner (1958), who concludes that middle-class parents tend to use less physical punishment and rely more on appeals to guilt and the threat of withdrawal of love. Bronfenbrenner also reviews some evidence indicating that the middle-class techniques of socialization are likely to be more effective, so that studies of family differences and class differences tend to reinforce each other.

Perhaps the most thorough investigation of this matter is that carried out by Sears, Maccoby & Levin (1957). In this study two correlated dimensions of maternal attitude towards aggression were found, namely punishment of aggression

and permissiveness of aggression. Of these, the punishment of aggression factor seems relatively straightforward. It was found that a mother's punishment of her child's aggression was positively related to the amount of aggression the child displayed, and that working-class mothers made greater use of punishment, so that these class differences in child-rearing techniques do something to account for the class differences in socialization. On the other hand, the permissiveness factor does not seem to operate consistently, since maternal permissiveness was found to be positively related to the aggression of the child, and it might therefore be expected that working-class mothers would be more permissive than middle-class mothers. In fact, the reverse was found to be the case. These class differences in permissiveness throw some doubt on the finding of Sears and his associates, a doubt which is strengthened by Lynn's (1961) failure to confirm the finding among English families. It should be noted, however, that when the Sears sample was broken down into national groups, the British middle-class mothers emerged as less permissive than working-class mothers. This is, of course, the finding that would be expected from the theory that permissiveness encourages aggression, and if confirmed it would do something to strengthen the theory. Accordingly we have carried out the investigation described below to elucidate English class differences in mothers' attitudes to child rearing.

THE INVESTIGATION

The sample of English mothers on whom the investigation was carried out was made up as follows. Forty-eight mothers (21 middle class and 27 working class) were obtained at parent-teachers' association meetings of two village schools in Devon. These mothers showed the same class differences as those reported by Sears, but in view of the possibility of bias in the sample a further investigation was made in the city of Exeter. Here middle- and working-class residential areas were selected and interviewers called at the houses; all mothers of children aged 4-18 years were asked to complete the questionnaire (described below) measuring attitudes to child-rearing. In this way a further 22 middle-class and 24 working-class mothers were obtained. The trend in this sample was in the same direction as that obtained from the parent-teacher associations and the two samples were therefore pooled.

The measuring instrument used consists of five scales drawn up and standardized by Sears and his colleagues. The scales take the form of remarks made by mothers about the behaviour of their 5-year-old children and the way they dealt with it. For example, the first item of the punishment of aggression scale runs: 'Yesterday Mark deliberately dumped a box of soap on the floor, and I decided the best way to handle it was to call off our afternoon walk to the playground.' The mother has to read these statements and indicate on a five-point scale how far she agrees or disagrees with the course of action taken. Three of Sears' scales were used in the present study, namely punishment of aggression, permissiveness of aggression, and permissiveness of immodesty.

The sample of mothers was divided into middle and working class on the basis of the husband's occupation as classified by the Registrar-General. Table 1 shows

the mean scores of the middle- and working-class mothers and, for comparative purposes, of the American sample investigated by Sears.

All the mean differences between the social classes in England are statistically significant at the 0.05 level (using the 't' test). Of the differences between the total

Table 1. *Mean scores and S.D.s of British middle-class and working-class and American mothers on scales assessing attitudes towards child socialization*

	Permissive of immodesty	Punishment of aggression	Permissiveness of aggression
British middle class	48.56 ± 7.46	42.44 ± 8.63	53.13 ± 6.59
British working class	40.88 ± 7.99	46.67 ± 6.98	49.61 ± 8.87
British total	44.55 ± 8.66	44.65 ± 8.07	51.30 ± 8.00
American total	54.65 ± 7.07	41.90 ± 7.31	60.13 ± 10.57

English sample and the American sample, the two differ significantly at the 0.05 level on the scales permissiveness of immodesty and permissiveness of aggression, but only differ significantly at the 0.10 level on the punishment of aggression scale.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results emerging from the study are as follows:

(1) In England, as in the U.S.A., middle-class mothers are less punitive than working-class mothers. This finding strengthens further the theory that there is a relation between maternal punitiveness and the aggression of the child.

(2) English middle-class mothers are also like American middle-class mothers in being more permissive of aggressive behaviour. This finding throws more doubt on the Sears finding that there is a relation between maternal permissiveness and the child's aggression.

(3) English mothers tend to be less permissive and more punitive than American mothers. Assuming that punitiveness is the more important factor, it would be expected from this finding that the English would be more aggressive and less well socialized in general than the Americans. While we do not know of any investigation explicitly designed to test this proposition, the available evidence makes us suspect that, if anything, it is the Americans who tend to be less well socialized than the English. For example, the number of murders per head of the population is considerably higher in America (Royal Commission on Capital Punishment, 1953); American school-children are less concerned about educational attainment (Sarnoff *et al.*, 1958) and are educationally less forward (Pidgeon, 1958); and Americans have more extraverted behaviour patterns (Eysenck, 1959). We do not regard this evidence as more than suggestive, but it does present something of a challenge to the theory linking maternal punitiveness to the aggression of the child.

It is possible to explain this difficulty by considering hereditary factors. Aggression is related to Eysenck's personality dimension of extraversion (e.g. Eysenck, 1954), and individual differences in this dimension are determined to a considerable degree by inheritance (e.g. Shields, 1958). The fact that Americans are more extraverted than the English may therefore be due to the fact that they are

genetically a more extraverted strain. When it is considered that Americans are descended from ancestors who have emigrated it seems not improbable that they are selected for some personality factor; and in view of the findings that people with extraverted characteristics are intolerant of monotonous stimuli (Petrie, Collins & Solomon, 1960) it seems not implausible that extraversion might be a factor in emigration. Such a hypothesis could, of course, easily be checked. Now it has been shown that extraverted mothers are less punitive towards their children than introverted mothers (Lynn, 1961) and this finding is consistent with the finding that American mothers are less punitive than English mothers. It is, therefore, suggested that the hereditary factor of extraversion accounts for both the non-punitiveness of American mothers and the aggressiveness of their children, and that the hereditary factor is a more important determinant of aggression than the mother's punitiveness.

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