

SECOND PRINTING

UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Compiled and Edited by

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For the first time in a single published source . . . papers which describe, explain, and suggest remediation for the highly complex and significant phenomenon of underachievement.

These 51 papers were selected from over 500 published and unpublished studies. They are recent . . . they represent numerous disciplines . . . they are reports of research in the formal sense or clinical case studies.

Although the text — because of available literature — was forced in the direction of the bright underachiever, there are papers suggesting that the mentally retarded and the large intellectually average group are quite capable of underachieving as well. Two papers challenge the concept of underachievement.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE EDITOR'S GOAL has been to assemble what heretofore was scattered in nineteen journals, two books, a monograph, or was unpublished, in the enormously complex and exciting area of academic underachievement. These fifty-one contributions represent a sample selected from no less than five hundred published and unpublished papers.

Rather definite criteria for selecting a paper were established. Almost every criterion was violated when it was decided that a study, though it was essentially concerned with achievement, achievement motivation, or overachievement, contributed to an understanding of underachievement. In addition, papers challenging the concept of underachievement were included on the assumption that it is healthier not to be complacent about one's convictions.

Now that the editor has apologized for occasionally disregarding self-imposed regulations for selecting or rejecting papers, let us briefly review the criteria: (1) Papers of the "in my experience" tradition were not selected. Rather, reports of research, in the formal sense, and clinical case studies, were favored; (2) Preference was given to recent studies. Only fourteen of the fifty-one papers are pre-1960; (3) Positive findings were not required. For example, a paper by Winborn and Schmidt (The effectiveness of short-term group counseling upon the academic achievement of potentially superior but underachieving college freshmen) in which group counseling seemingly *adversely* effected underachievers was selected as well as a paper by Schoenhard (Home visitation put to a test) in which home visitation was not of assistance; (4) Investigations of highly specific underachievement (reading; language) or of

specific underachievers (engineers) were avoided; (5) Prediction of achievement studies were not selected, and (6) Papers lopsided in the presentation of tables and graphs but accompanied by meager discussion were rejected.

Considerable underachievement research is directed toward the intellectually gifted underachiever. Do not other groups underachieve? Although the editor never planned to concentrate excessively on the bright underachiever, it may appear that way. Fortunately, some investigators (e.g., Duff and Siegel, Biographical factors associated with academic over- and underachievement) used groups of high *and* low ability underachievers. Dr. Abel's investigation should remind us that underachievement exists at both ends of the continuum of intellectual capacity. It is interesting that the description, underachieving mental retardate, sounds completely foreign. Hopefully, future investigations will include a broader range of underachievement. As for the large middle zone of ability, I would suspect that underachievers in this group are infrequently referred to guidance or psychology departments in a school system because their underachievement is less striking. This is regretful. Ease of identification should not direct our interests and attention. In a somewhat analogous situation, the extremely emotionally disturbed are often self-referred, referred by school personnel, or family. Yet it is probably those youngsters with *moderate* rather than severe emotional difficulties who might most profit from professional assistance. Less dramatic forms of underachievement too, might be more accessible to the treatment approaches described in Part III. If a particular remedial approach fails with underachievers, then I think we must ask, all underachievers?

In the next five to ten years, the editor predicts that the following will occur in academic underachievement research: (1) Papers studying the effects of desegregation upon academic achievement (there are a few currently); (2) More sophisticated design of experiments; (3) A lengthier and even more varied treatment section; (4) A developmental study of underachievement, evaluating psychological and non-psychological variables

from infancy through adolescence; (5) Someone will have the wisdom to provide a desperately needed review of the underachievement literature accompanied by a compulsively complete bibliography, and (6) Increasingly novel and creative contributions both in concepts and therapeutic approach. A glimpse of this is already discernible.

To the contributors, all of whom were exceptionally patient and generous, and to the staff of Charles C Thomas, Publisher, especially Payne Thomas, who was consistently encouraging and helpful, my sincere thanks.

MILTON KORNRICH

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UNDERACHIEVEMENT

PART I

**PSYCHODYNAMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL
FACTORS**

When an individual does not utilize to the full his capacity, it is not only a loss to society, but it is also a personal frustration. Human beings are not natively inert and inactive.

PAUL HOOVER BOWMAN

I think there is a connection between my school work and love and affection.

ANGELA, 16

THE RORSCHACH TEST AND SCHOOL SUCCESS AMONG MENTAL DEFECTIVES

THEODORA M. ABEL

IN AN INSTITUTION for mental defectives we find pupils who succeed and those who fail in the simple academic work gauged to meet the mental level of the subnormal pupil, just as we find academic successes and failures in any regular school in the community. Also, we have children in the institution school, as we do in any public or private school, whose failures cannot be attributed solely to a low I.Q. as measured by the Terman or similar psychometric tests.

Since the Rorschach Test provides rich material for diagnosing the structure and dynamics of the personality of the school lag-gard who won't or cannot keep up in school work, we were interested in finding out to what extent this technique would differentiate between subnormals with equivalent chronological ages and intelligence ratings some of whom succeeded in an institution school while others failed to keep up in the work. For this purpose we selected fifteen pairs of moron white girls, each pair being matched for Terman (1916) I.Q. within five points (range of I.Q. 48-76) and for chronological age within five months (range of C.A. 11 yrs. 1 mo.-15 yrs. 11 mos.). There was a difference in school placement, however, of two or three grades between the members of each pair of girls (grade range 1-4). We shall refer to the fifteen girls in the more advanced grades as the Higher Educational Group (HEG) and to the girls in the lower grades as the Lower Educational Group (LEG).

The Rorschach Test was administered to these thirty girls in the spring of 1943, in the Research Department of Letchworth Village, a New York State institution for mental defectives.

RESULTS

The higher and lower educational groups do not differ in the total number of responses to the blots: the average number of responses for the HEG is 13.1 ± 2.2 (range 8-21 responses) while for the LEG the average frequency of responses is 12.2 ± 3.7 (range 6-28 responses). The small difference in average, .9, is not reliable statistically. Nor are the groups differentiated in terms of the frequencies with which they give W, D, d, dd, and S answers.

There are, however, differences in the dynamic aspects of response, in the content and in the frequency with which P answers are made. The HEG gives more M and FM, more FC and a greater number of H and Hd answers than does the LEG. If we add together the number of responses in each of these categories for every girl and use these summated scores in our comparisons, we obtain a difference in score between our two groups which is statistically reliable. Using the summated score ($M+FM+FC+H+Hd$) we obtain a range of score from 2 to 16, and an average score of 4.9 with a P.E. of 2.22 for the HEG. For the LEG the score range is 0-9, average score 2.4 and P.E. 1.62. By the method of variance analysis, the F value between these two groups is 5.18, a value of only 4.2 being needed for reliability with a probable error of 5 per cent.

The HEG also gives quite a good many more P answers than does the LEG. This can be seen by the fact that the range of frequencies of P responses for the former group is 1-7, the average frequency is 3.7 ± 1.1 . For the latter, the LEG, the frequency range of popular answers is 0-5, with an average of $2.1 \pm .95$. Using the method of analysis of variance between the scores in the two groups we obtain an F value of 7.4 which is statistically reliable.

Other ways of responding, namely, rejecting cards, giving F- answers, CF and C responses and having a content of response in categories other than H or A are more characteristic of our lower than our higher educational group. Here again we summated the frequencies with which these modes of response occur for each girl and analyzed statistically these combined scores

(Rej+F-+CF+C+all content not H or A). For the HEG the summated score range is 1-9, and the average score is 4.5 ± 1.4 , while for the LEG the range is 1-31, and the average score is 9.1 ± 4.8 . The F value between the scores of the two groups is 5.26, higher than that needed for statistical reliability.

There was a tendency for the higher educational group to give more A and Ad responses than the lower educational group. For the HEG the range of A responses is 4.17, with an average of 9.1 ± 2.3 , for the LEG the range is 3-13, with an average of 7.3 ± 2.03 . This difference we might expect since the LEG give so many responses not in the H and C categories. But the difference is not reliable statistically.

As a group the HEG is more even and homogeneous in its responses to the Rorschach cards than is the LEG. If we employ the Variability Formula $\frac{SD}{Av} \times 100$ we find several comparisons

Av.

in which the HEG shows less variability than the LEG. For instance, in the number of total R the HEG is only 54 per cent as variable as the LEG. In a comparison of summated scores showing favorable Rorschach signs (M+FM+H+Hd+FC) the higher group is only 68.2 per cent as variable as the lower group. In the distribution of the less favorable scores (Rej.+F-+CF+C+content not H or A) again the high group is only 60.1 per cent as variable as the low group. Hence the signs found in this study to be indicators of success in school are more valuable from the predictive point of view than are the signs given by the girls who are doing less well in school.

We have an interesting comparison between our two groups of girls in the rapidity with which they made their initial response to the achromatic and colored cards. We averaged the reaction time for each subject for the five black cards and for the five color cards separately and then compared these scores for our two groups of subjects. We must note here that the record of one girl in our lower educational group had to be excluded from these comparisons because this girl was a severe clonic stutterer and sometimes failed to respond to a card at all except by means of paper and pencil. She was able to draw her

interpretation of her response to a card more easily than to speak.

For the scores obtained on the average reaction time to black or color cards, there is quite a scattering in the distribution. We give below the range and median for these average reaction times:

	<i>No. Girls</i>	<i>Av. Reaction time to black cards</i>		<i>Av. Reaction time to color cards</i>	
		<i>Range</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Median</i>
HEG	15	2 - 32.2	11.2	3.6 - 56.2	20.3
LEG	14	12 - 62.6	22	8 - 87.4	28.5

Both groups react more slowly to the color than to the achromatic cards. These differences, however, are only tendencies since they are not reliable statistically. The LEG is slower in making responses to both black and color cards than is the HEG. But in the analysis of variance the difference in scores between the two groups is a true difference statistically only in the case of the reaction time to the black cards. For the variance between the groups on the black cards, the F value is 8.24 (for a reliability with a Probable Error of 1 per cent the F value need be only 7.64), while in the case of the comparison of reaction time to the color cards, the F value is only 2.61, (an insignificant figure in terms of reliability of difference).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

On the Rorschach Test the better educational group gives the kinds of response associated with greater integration of inner life (M, FM), more adequate control of environmental stimuli (FC), greater maturity as expressed by human content responses (H and Hd), and greater awareness of reality (Popular answers). Certainly these aspects of mental functioning would be favorable to learning and adjusting to the school situation. The poorer group conversely reveals different aspects of mental functioning, greater withdrawal from a difficult situation (rejection of cards), less clear-cut and more confused perceptions F-), greater egocentricity and stimulation from the external environment without adequate control of the situation (CF, C) and a more varied content (more responses in other categories than H and A).

The latter aspect of response, more varied content, suggests that our poorer group is more original in perceptual interpretations than our higher group. In one way, we can see that this is true, for they conform less to standard modes of response but their responses are less well organized. To get along in school the individual cannot afford to have confused phantasy experiences!

In reaction time to cards, the better group responds more quickly to the black cards. The reason for this is perhaps not possible to explain without further study. Our suggestion is that the poorer group is generally slower in response to all the cards, whereas the better group is slowed up on the color cards because they do get some color shock. Being better conformists and able to form pretty well integrated perceptions and control their imaginative experiences, they find the task easier, especially on the black cards, whereas on the color cards they are delayed in responding due to phenomenon of color shock. This is further confirmed by the fact that they give so few color answers.

On the other hand, it is possible that the poorer group is shocked by the black cards as well as by the color cards and so gives delayed responses to all cards, black or colored. Oberholzer¹ found in his analysis of the Rorschach records of thirty-seven adults in a primitive tribe on an island of the East Indies that these individuals responded to the black cards only after long pauses and in a staggered and hesitating manner.¹ He suggests that each black card can cause a shock not due to chiaroscuro effects but to the black color like a genuine color shock of neurotics. In addition, this primitive group gives very few M and FC responses, but shows a predominance of CF- and C answers. All of these results which are similar to some degree to the Rorschach scores of our lower educational group, suggest that this latter group is functioning in a more primitive manner than is our higher educational group. What we mean by "primitive" is functioning in an egocentric manner, a manner not well oriented to the culture in which we live. Perhaps we are pushing the analogy too far in comparing the adults of Alor with

¹ We wish to thank Dr. Z. Piotrowski for turning our attention to this analysis of Oberholzer's.

some of our mental defective girls, but at least the comparison is suggestive of further exploration.

At the Wayne County Training School, a series of studies have been made by Werner and other investigators on the modes of perceiving and conceptual thinking of two groups of mentally retarded children, those whose deficiency is of the familial type and those whose mental defect is due to brain injury. In several respects our lower educational group shows ways of mental functioning described by Strauss and Werner (2) as characteristic of brain-injured children. For instance, these authors point out how brain-injured children have an attitude towards every day objects and events less factual and realistic than do familial feebleminded children of the same mental age. Also these children with damaged brains are abnormally distractible being greatly influenced by external stimulation and have less understanding of purposeful activity or self-directed behavior.

In a specific study of Rorschach findings on the two clinical types of feebleminded boys, Werner (3) reports that the brain-injured children give less M and FM, but react more strongly to CF and crude C than does his "familial" group. The latter group gives more A responses. In these respects our HEG responds as does Werner's "familial" group while our LEG show the characteristics of his brain-injured children. On the other hand, our results vary from Werner's in that his brain-injured children give more H form. It is our higher educational group that gives more H as well as more A responses.

We should not expect, of course, to find our results entirely comparable with those of Werner. His subjects have the same chronological age range as do ours (11-16) but they are all boys while our subjects are all girls. Furthermore, the boys in Werner's study have higher mental ratings than do our girls. (His range of I.Q. is 58-87 with the mean at about 72; our range and average are at least ten points lower). Finally, our two groups are differentiated educationally rather than genetically and neurologically. Nevertheless, we believe that our results are enough similar to Werner's to warrant looking into the genetic and neurological pictures presented by our girls.

As a result of a special neurological examination² and review of the medical history we were able to divide our two educational groups into the following classifications:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Definitely no organic brain damage</i>	<i>Possible organic brain damage</i>	<i>Organic brain damage</i>
HEG	11	4	0
LEG	7	5	3

The lower educational group has eight out of fifteen cases with brain damage or possible brain injury, while the higher group has no definite case of brain damage, only four with possible brain damage (i.e., history of epilepsy, neurological localized signs, associated movements). This difference, however, is only a trend and is not statistically reliable $\chi^2=4.0$, $P=<.20> .10$). As for the genetic history, in our low group there are eight cases with known mental deficiency in parents or siblings, and only six such cases in our higher group. To complicate matters three organic cases in the lower group and one possible brain-injured case in the higher group have mentally deficient siblings. In the lower group there is one girl who approximates in body build a chondrodystrophic dwarf (there is also dwarfism reported in the family history).

In addition we find handicaps or at least physical characteristics that might impede educational achievement in the lower group. In this group there are six left-handed girls, which in the high group there is only one (this difference is statistically reliable $\chi^2=4.65$, $P=<.05> .02$). Also in the lower group four girls have speech defects, one so severe she hardly can be understood, while only one girl in the higher group has this difficulty. One girl in the lower group is lame from poliomyelitis; two have very poor motor coordination. Another girl is quite deaf. On the other hand, in the higher group there is one girls who is slightly deaf, two girls with very poor coordination, and one excessively overweight girl who is slow and sluggish.

² Thanks are due Dr. F. A. Quadfasel, Captain, U. S. Army, for taking the time to make thorough neurological examinations. Thanks are also due Mrs. Quadfasel, Yale University, and Miss Ruth Demarest, Letchworth Village, for assisting Dr. Quadfasel in these examinations.

In summarizing the medical and family history we may say that our lower educational group has more handicaps than the higher one, more cases of brain injury, more left-handedness, speech defects, and other structural difficulties (lameness, deafness). The higher group is not free from these handicaps, however, but they appear less frequently. Thus from the medical and family history alone we cannot make an entirely reliable prediction as to who will do well in school. It is true brain injury or suspected brain injury and some structural defects will play a role in impeding school progress. But some of the girls in our higher group succeed pretty well in getting along in school in spite of these tangible limitations and handicaps while a few of the girls in the LEG do not make school progress even though they are free from these deficiencies and impediments.

SUMMARY

We have found out in the present investigation that two groups of fifteen subnormal girls matched for chronological age and Terman I.Q. but differentiated on the basis of academic school success and failure, show marked differences in their responses to the Rorschach Test. Those who give indications on the Rorschach of adequate inner and outer control (M+FC) and who conform to certain standards expected in a more or less balanced record (H+A+P+good form) and who respond quickly to achromatic cards, make progress in school work. In contrast the girls who manifest impulsiveness and egocentricity (CF+C+infrequent P), less well-organized imagination (F-and content not H or A), and have slow reaction times to both color and achromatic cards, do not advance in school work. We have also seen, however, that the group succeeding in school is more homogeneous in its responses to the ink-blots while the lower educational group is less homogeneous and more variable in the type of response different members of the group make. We noted that our lower educational group has more cases of physical handicaps, brain injury or suspected brain injury than does our higher educational group. But this difference between the two groups is only a tendency and does not meet statistical reliability.

Success in academic work is, of course, determined by a multiplicity of factors both external and internal to the individual. In this study it is the psychological factors rather than physical ones that have best given us information about success and failure in the work of an institutional school. More specifically it is the productions of the individual on the Rorschach Test that have revealed to us psychological criteria for ability to learn the three Rs.

It is our hope that mentally deficient children who are unable to do academic work in spite of their I.Q. rating may be identified before they have had to experience long periods of failure in school tasks. It is our further hope that these children who seem unable to learn more than the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic will be given a type of education more suitable to their personality structure—an education that includes arts and crafts, more training in muscular control, more chance for free play, greater individual work in cases of special handicaps along with much less emphasis on learning verbal and numerical symbols.

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WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT LIMITATIONS AND COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT

EMANUEL M. BERGER

THE CONCEPT “willingness to accept limitations,” was developed from the observation of a pattern of attitudes in certain cases of underachievement in college, and a relating of the observed pattern to theoretical ideas concerning the idealized image and self-acceptance.

AN OBSERVED PATTERN OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR AND SOME THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In a previous paper (Berger, 1958), an analysis was made of the case records of four high-ability, underachieving college students. Four kinds of attitudes seemed to be common to these students, and the pattern appeared to be one that occurred in many other similar cases: (1) extremely high standards for themselves, (2) a denial of wholeheartedness in their efforts, (3) the belief that they should be able to achieve at a high level with little effort; achieving through hard work is not especially creditable, (4) an unwillingness to risk—being wrong, being disappointed, doing poorly.

Most of the students in whom this pattern was observed had superior records in high school and very high scores on college aptitude or intelligence tests. A brief illustrative case might serve to give a clearer picture of the kind of student being considered.

A twenty-two-year-old graduate student was referred by his advisor, a professor in the department of the student's major field. The advisor saw the student as having a good

potential but as being confused and ineffective in his courses. The student's Miller Analogies Test score was in the top 10 per cent of graduate students in comparable fields at the university. He described himself as exerting practically no effort in his graduate work. He had envisioned a life without disappointment up to his senior year in college — had thought he could do anything he wanted. Following some setbacks in his efforts as a student leader and in his college work, he felt he was a "failure." The student had at first done much in music with little experience and was considered talented by others and he had aspired to be a concert pianist but later was discouraged by people whose opinion he respected. He compared himself unfavorably to Mozart.

The student talked of the large number of failures in his life, apparently referring to music, school and losing the girl he had wanted. He would not want to have a responsible position where decisions came from him alone and there was no guidance or absolute assurance that his decisions were right. He gets discouraged when what he does in school is not perfect, feeling there is then no point in it. He expects others to see him as incompetent if he tries something and does not do well at it immediately, such as teaching a class for the first time. Because he worked as an undergraduate he did not feel he deserved the recognition he got as a scholar. "Anyone could have done as well by working hard." He would not want status and recognition because "the more you have the more there is to lose." He said in an early interview that he would be satisfied to be a dishwasher because of the low level of achievement.

The Idealized Image

The basic idea of an idealized self or ego image can be found in Zen writings that go back to the eighth and ninth centuries. In a recent interpretation of Zen (Watts, 1957), the concept called "ego image" is described. This concept represents the conditioning of the individual by the group, a fixed idea of the self as the group wants it to be for purposes of social control. Those who go astray and lose their selves, their naturalness, are those who try to be some fixed image of the self rather than accepting their humanity. Accepting one's humanity in this