The Importance of Adolescent Norms

Edward R. Ostrander and Lorraine H. Snyder

The adolescent's development of a self concept is "one of life's most burning issues," Ostrander says. Norms or a personal frame of reference are critical to the development of a self concept. How different are Extension's youth program norms from those norms already held by the potential youth audience? Ostrander offers several suggestions for work with adolescent groups using knowledge of norms as a starting place.

"The central theme of adolescence is the finding of one's self."[1] This statement should be hung over the desk of every extension youth worker as a key to understanding teen-agers. Individuals at every stage of the life cycle may be concerned with their self concept, but to the adolescent this is one of life's most burning issues. The adult who treats this condition lightly or unsympathetically will lose contact with the young person he's trying to reach.

What Is a Norm?

Social psychologists seek to understand the process of human interaction. Norms or frames of reference are products of human interaction critical to the development of a self concept. Kurt Riezler's classic article on the social psychology of fear describes the need for a frame of reference and the panic that results without it.[2] He presents a norm or "scheme for the order of the possible" as consisting of a system of rules, principles, and assumptions that are taken for granted.

We know when we jump out of bed in the morning that the floor won't give way under our feet because it didn't give way yesterday or the day before. We live in an assumptive world involving people, objects, and events whose validity is

EDWARD R. OSTRANDER is Associate Professor, Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, and LORRAINE H. SNYDER is Research Assistant, Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

confirmed by others through what Riezler calls a "universe of discourse." He means that we share ideas with others who confirm our views of ourselves and life's daily happenings.

Adolescents diligently strive to develop a personal frame of reference. And, their universe of discourse is carried on with a variety of groups and individuals. Some groups are listened to more attentively and their reactions valued more highly. Peers constitute one valued group. These frames of reference or norms might be thought of as a constellation of group-defined attitudes.

Bates refers to a norm as a pattern of commonly held behavior expectations.[3] The array of norms an adolescent may face includes some that are in conflict. We'll discuss reconciliation of norms in conflict later.

Norm Development

Adolescent norm development is actually carried out through the socialization process. People who contribute to that process are socialization agents. Most socialization agents represent society's established institutions. These agents are formal or informal trainers who are instrumental in determining the way youth are introduced to the institution's attitudes and norms. Each institution has a domain of concern. The church's representatives focus on the individual's moral life; the school's agents provide tools and strategies for coping with intellectual problems.

The bulk of the young person's affective learning comes from the family. The family may contribute to norms that determine food preferences, work habits, and personal outlook. Peer norms are most influential in formulating the adolescent's self concept. William James declared, "A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their minds."[4] In James' view, the adolescent's situation might be shown as a series of concentric circles surrounding the individual as shown in Figure 1.

The large circles on the inner ring represent the most important groups offering norms to which the youth responds. The smaller circles at a greater distance are additional groups and organizations whose norms may affect the youth's behavior. In some instances these norms may be as critical as the institutional ones. The youth must reconcile the diverse norms in a way that will provide him with a consistent frame of reference and a unified self concept.

Extension programs are aimed at presenting youth with new ideas, attitudes, and skills. As such they can be considered another institution's attempt to introduce new norms or at least influence old norms. The program objectives detail the norm. The agents present these norms to young people for their approval, acceptance, and use. Often a socializing agent will find that the norm he's recommending differs from that held
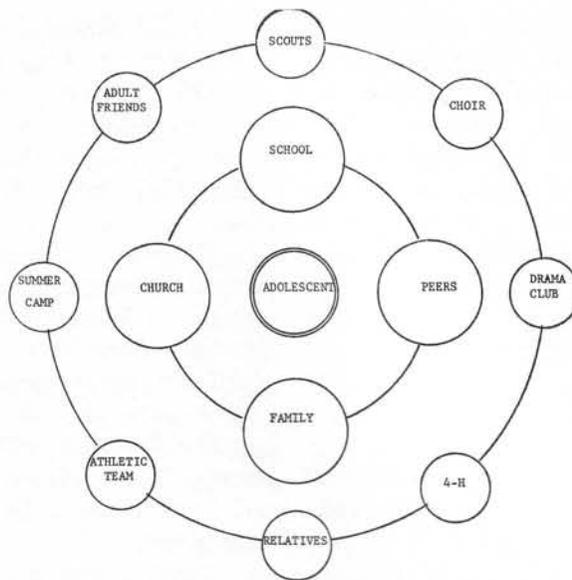
Figure 1. Groups providing norms for adolescent behavior.

by his audience. For those with the task of changing norms, an understanding of the process of norm formation is essential.

One of the benchmark studies in norm formation was done in the early 1930s by Muzafer Sherif at Columbia University.[5] He investigated the effect of interpersonal activity on attitudes and norms. To control his test conditions, he worked in the laboratory. The task was to report the apparent distance a stationary point of light moved in a darkened room. Sherif recorded the estimate of movement stated by individual subjects. Subjects whose judgments differed in range of movement were paired and they alternated their oral reports. Under these circumstances, he found the

judgments of the two individuals converged toward a compromise figure. When retested individually, the subjects gave the compromise estimate rather than their earlier judgment.

Sherif concluded that norms are a result of social interaction and that the individual is subsequently guided by the norms. Additional factors that may influence the acceptance of a norm include the size of the group holding it and the group's power to satisfy the individual's needs.

The operation of group norms in adolescent clothing choices is demonstrated in a thesis by Taylor.[6] She found that adolescent girls like to have their friends along when shopping for clothes. White found

that among younger adolescents the mothers' norms with respect to appropriate price of school dresses are internalized by their daughters.[7] She found less agreement between mothers and daughters on style; the peer group was more influential here. In some states public schools define acceptable clothing norms. Adolescent clothing choices are influenced by many groups' norms.

Norm Change

Norm allegiance is maintained because it satisfies personal needs. Need for belonging is a key factor in the case of peer norms for clothing. When introducing any program to an adolescent audience, a question to ask is: What needs can the new norms satisfy? The change agent should be sensitive to the motivation underlying the norm that he's trying to change.

University of Michigan psychology professors Sarnoff and Katz offer a useful analysis of the motivational basis for attitude change.[8] Since we have accepted a norm as a group-defined set of attitudes, the Sarnoff and Katz analysis is applicable to norm change. These psychologists contend that when we understand why people hold a given attitude, we can determine the most appropriate way to change this attitude. They describe three bases on which attitudes are formed and held. Each one relates to the motivational needs that the attitudes satisfy.

First, some norms are subscribed to because of lack of information. To change a norm that is held solely out of ignorance is relatively simple: merely provide the appropriate information. Unfortunately, most attitudes are held for reasons other than lack of information alone.

Secondly, norms are subscribed to because of the positive or negative reinforcement the group provides. When the leader and other significant group members change their point of view, the positive and negative feedback will reflect the change. The reinforcement pattern will be in line with the group's prevailing view.

Finally, there are attitudes that are held for ego-defensive reasons. In extreme cases, psychotherapy may be the only solution. Many attitudes are held because certain facts make people self-defensive. Some groups hold norms for the same reasons. Sarnoff and Katz suggest that a multidimensional approach is often the most effective in changing attitudes or norms.

Some Practical Suggestions

It's important to determine as accurately as possible the norms held by the audience before making a presentation. A critical skill needed by the change agent working with an adolescent group is the ability to accurately diagnose the degree of congruity between the program and youth's present norms. Also, knowledge of the extent to which the prevailing norm is entrenched is essential. The accuracy of the diag-

nosis will determine the effectiveness of any approach.

For instance, in a consumer education program stressing the importance of looking for quality workmanship in clothing construction, one must be sensitive to the teen-age girl's concern for fashion rather than maximum durability. The importance of clothing as an extension of the self makes peer group norms on stylishness crucial. If the message de-emphasizes style or the "in" colors by concentrating on durability you may appeal to mothers, but you won't captivate the daughters.

Knowing the norms enables the flexible and imaginative agent to build a bridge between the two norms. Unfortunately, there is limited general information on youth's norms that will specifically apply to your group. The rate of norm change on some issues is so fast that information on an adolescent point of view must be constantly reexamined. This is particularly true of clothing norms among adolescents.

The Taylor thesis reveals some interesting relationships between need for approval and clothing interest. In terms of general interest patterns, boys and girls can be arrayed along a continuum from feminine to masculine interests. It's safe to assume that for the majority of teen-age girls, figure, grooming, and general appearance are of great concern. At that age boys may be athletically competent, musical, or have other talents that win peer acceptance regardless of their general appearance and grooming. Miss Taylor hypothesized that some boys are more interested in clothes and other matters that aligned them with interest patterns of girls their age. On the other hand, some girls might have musical or scientific interests that would locate them closer to the male interest end of the continuum.

Data were collected on clothing interest and a psychological test measured need for approval. When the results were analyzed, boys' scores showed no relationship between need for approval and clothing interest. The girls who had a greater need for approval were more interested in clothing than the girls with less need for approval. This suggests that the sex role definition provides a peer norm of different intensity for males and females with respect to clothing and appearance.

An extension agent has several alternatives open to him when he finds that the norms he's recommending differ from those the adolescents value. When there is a conflict between norms, youth won't abandon their norm unless the alternative has clear relevance for them.

An agent's first concern is the development of rapport and acceptance. For an adult to gain rapport requires authenticity. It doesn't mean dressing like a teen-ager, picking up superficial lingo, or belittling other norms. Adolescents tune out quickly. Beware of commercially prepared handouts that are passé. A sheet with suggestions for a job interview admonishes, "and don't forget a hat. Most employers feel that

wearing a hat is a definite sign of maturity." Most adolescent males probably don't even own a hat. The questionable validity of the relationship of hat wearing and maturity would strike many youths as typical unproven establishment logic.

Another pamphlet distributed by a manufacturer's association discusses grooming and appearance. This piece warns, "Buy only clothes that look well on *you*—not just on fashion models or your friends." Basically this is good advice, but to the adolescent wanting to belong to the "group" such advice creates a conflict.

An understanding of your adolescent audience's norms enables you to clarify the material and avoid loss of credibility for distributing such material.

Summary

As a youth worker, you have a variety of norms to contend with. You must recognize your own norms. In any given situation, you probably deal simultaneously with four sets of norms: your supervisors', the youths', the program's, and your own. Each of these norms may be operating in varying degrees. You must be able to translate your program goals or material into the frame of reference of the audience. To paraphrase the clinical psychologist Carl Rogers: As a teacher, I cannot teach. I can only facilitate learning.

Those working with youth cannot provide the adolescent with a self, but can only expose him to norms and experiences that he can incorporate as a part of the self concept he builds on his own.

Footnotes

1. L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church, *Childhood and Adolescence* (New York, New York: Random House, 1957), p. 270.
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3. F. L. Bates, "Position, Role, and Status: A Reformulation of the Concepts," *Social Forces*, XXXIV (1956), 313-21.
4. William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course* (New York, New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 192-93.
5. Muzafer Sherif, *The Psychology of Social Norms* (New York, New York: Harper & Bros., 1936) and Muzafer Sherif, "An Experimental Approach to the Study of Attitudes," *Sociometry*, I (July-October, 1937), 90-98.
6. Elizabeth J. Taylor, "Demographic and Personality Factors Relating to Adolescent Clothing Consumer Behavior" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1969).
7. Katherine A. White, "Preadolescent Girls' Figure Satisfaction in Relation to Their Consumer Behavior" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1969).
8. Irving Sarnoff and Daniel Katz, "The Motivational Bases of Attitude Change," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XLIX (January, 1954), 115-24.