The Picture Arrangement Subtest of the WAIS as an Index of Social Egocentrism: A Comparative Study of Normal and Emotionally Disturbed Children

MICHAEL J. CHANDLER

University of Rochester

This study describes a measure of social egocentrism based on a procedural variation in the Picture Arrangement subtest of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, compares this procedure with other previously proposed measures of egocentricity, and reports an application of this measure in the comparative study of 30 normal and emotionally disturbed children. The results of this comparison indicate that institutionalized children are sharply differentiated from their better adjusted peers in their ability to take roles or perspectives other than their own.

This study described a procedural variation in the standard method of administering the Picture Arrangement subtest of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), which provides a method of measuring the relative ability with which persons are able to adopt the roles or perspectives of others. The study also described the results of an application of this and related measures of egocentric thinking to two groups of children of markedly different mental health status.

The ability of a person to step outside of his own egocentric perspective and to adopt roles and perspectives other than his own is a well-documented facet of the normal socialization process and has been a matter of recurrent interest to both developmental psychologists and mental health professionals. Young children and seriously disordered adults alike have been shown to fail routinely at tasks that require the ability to differentiate one's self from others and to discriminate public from private thoughts and feelings (Anthony, 1959; Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968; Haines, 1950; Martin, 1968; Neale, 1966).

1 Thanks are extended the children and staff of the children's service of the Menninger Foundation for their help and support in the completion of this study.

2 Requests for reprints should be sent to Michael J. Chandler, Department of Psychology, University of Rochester, River Station, Rochester, New York 14627.
Many important social and interpersonal skills have been shown to hinge on this ability (Cowan, 1966; Feffer & Gourevitch, 1960; Sarbin, 1954), and both diagnostic and treatment decisions frequently rest on informal estimates of this development skill. These potential diagnostic and treatment implications argue for the appropriateness of developing some objective and readily available clinical procedure for determining the presence and extent of persistent egocentric thinking in both children and adults.

A number of laboratory procedures for indexing egocentric thinking have been described in the child development literature. Although differing in detail, all these procedures have required subjects to attempt a description of the same stimulus materials from multiple points of view. The best known and thoroughly researched of these procedures are the “Test of Three Mountains” developed by Piaget and Inhelder (1956) and the Role Taking Test introduced by Feffer and Gourevitch (1960). Piaget and Inhelder’s procedures inquire into perspective-taking skills in a somewhat literal sense and require subjects to indicate how a cluster of three papier-mâché mountains might appear to someone occupying a perceptual vantage other than their own. The Role Taking Test considers perspective-taking skills in a somewhat more metaphoric and social sense by requiring subjects to tell and retell stories to the same Make A Picture Story and Thematic Appreception Test (MAPS and TAT) cards, alternately assuming the roles or perspectives of the various characters depicted.

Although both procedures can and have been employed in the measurement of disordered populations (Anthony, 1959; Chandler, 1972, 1973; Neale, 1966), each possesses certain procedural limitations that restrict its usefulness and applicability for the purpose of clinical assessment. The Role Taking Test employs stimulus materials readily available in most clinical settings, and its potential usefulness as a diagnostic instrument is increased by the fact that it inquires into role- or perspective-taking skills in a social or interpersonal context. The difficulty with this procedure lies in the fact that both egocentric and nonegocentric inferences can, at times, result in identical test responses. Persons, including those depicted in the TAT and MAPS test, may often be understood as occupying identical perspectives or frames of reference. Because of this frequently occurring communality or likemindedness of thought, there is nothing inherently egocentric about assuming that two persons might share many thoughts and feelings in common. Prima facie evidence of egocentric thinking exists only when there are objective grounds for assuming that the persons whose points of view are being inquired into could not possibly share identical perspectives. The stimulus materials of the Role Taking Test, because they provide only a static and ahistoric glimpse into an interpersonal episode, offer no such evidence; and the attribution of identical points of view to the various characters presented in these materials cannot be unambiguously interpreted.