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