

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON MINORITY GROUP SELF-CONCEPT

by

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Management theorists have for some time been exploring new approaches to minority group development. To date, their efforts have mainly concentrated upon influencing individual and group behavior at the work situation. What they have generally failed to understand are the influences and bases behind the actual determination of worker self-image (what one thinks he is), and the role it plays in work achievement. The purpose of this paper is to state the relationship that exists between culturally acquired work habits and this self-concept.

Culturally Acquired Work Habits

It must be realized that culture is a social heritage. It comprises all the customs, beliefs, skills, and knowledges of the people who share it. Culture is the "distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete 'design for living.'"¹ All human behavior is affected by culture. It is the neglect of this relationship in man's behavior that too often provides a stumbling block in minority group development programs. "To understand what motivates members of a particular culture, one must place political or economic motives within their proper social-psychological context," remembering that all motives are learned.²

To further understand minority group motivation, one must also realize that cultures share common sentiments toward achievement. The noticeable differences between the vertical mobility

of certain minority groups can often be best explained as a function of their unique psychological and cultural orientation.

In discussing this topic, three main elements of achievement must be considered. They are achievement motivation, achievement values, and educational-occupational aspirations.³ Collectively, they provide the key to status achievement and are known as the achievement syndrome.

Achievement Motivation

Achievement motivation involves a system of social stratification where standards of excellence are passed to an individual from his parents. As can be expected, in time both begin to share the same standards. This sharing comes about through two types of socialization processes: 1) independence training, which involves helping children learn to be self-reliant and to do things on their own; and 2) achievement training, which seeks to communicate standards of accomplishment and high levels of expectant achievement to children. While both often occur together, achievement training is considered the most important.

Achievement Values

Achievement values are cultural and fortify achievement motivation. They "are defined as meaningful and affectively changed modes of organizing behavior—principles that guide human conduct."⁴ Achievement values are important because they influence goals by drawing attention to status improvement and the establishment of value criteria.

Educational-Occupational Aspirations

Educational-Occupational aspiration levels operate in reinforcing social mobility by determining the areas in which individual effort is concentrated. However, unless this effort involves occupational goals that the individual is prepared for, his motivation and value achievement will not aid in increasing his social status. Achievement motivation and achievement values build an individual's need and desire to accomplish. If this need does not reinforce the individual's educational-occupational aspirations, his efforts will usually be unproductive.

Empirical Data: Motivations, Values, Aspirations

In an effort to explain the differences in vertical mobility of racial and ethnic groups, Bernard Rosen disclosed a number of surprising dissimilarities in the motivations, values, and aspirations of Greeks, Jews, Blacks, white Protestants, Italians, and French-Canadians.⁵ His findings disclose that achievement motivation is more prevalent in Greeks, white Protestants, and Jews than in Italians and French-Canadians. Information on Blacks in this area is conflicting, showing that they often train children early in the area of self-reliance, but place less stress in the more important area of achievement training. Consequently, they have the lowest mean achievement motivation score. Rosen's study also indicates that Jews, white Protestants, and Greeks are more inclined to have higher educational and vocational aspirations as well as higher achievement values than Italians and French-Canadians. Surprisingly, Rosen found that the Blacks studied possessed achievement values and educational aspirations comparable to those of the Greeks, Jews, and white Protestants, but had the lowest vocational aspirations of any group sampled.

Acquired Self-Concept

Following Rosen and using his information concerning the Black minority group, it can be seen that they scored high in achievement values and educational aspirations, but low in vocational aspirations and achievement motivation, specifically in achievement training. While the lack of opportunity and varying means of discrimination have affected these needs greatly, the internal conception of self-image in relation to accomplishment is an area that development programs have all but neglected.

Individuals develop their self-image from what they believe the conception of others is of them. "The self . . . is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience."⁶ The psychological problems that arise from this socialization process often prove to be causes of achievement inhibition.

One of the most encompassing works in the area of vocational or occupational aspirations is that of Archibald Haller and Irwin Miller.⁷ They present a theory of occupational aspirations in a set of seven hypotheses. They define their use of the phrase "level of occupational aspiration" (LOA) as referring to a level in an occupational hierarchy.⁸

Haller and Miller **first** hypothesize that there is a high correlation between LOA and occupational achievement. This contention is based on the belief that attitudes are valid, within limits, in predicting actual behavior.⁹

A **second** hypothesis states that a correlation exists between LOA attained and success in school. This is seen as a means-behavior relationship for high occupational achievement and is especially true in professions that require educational success, e.g.—engineering, law, and medicine.¹⁰

A **third** relationship deals with the correlation between a person's LOA and the success orientation of the group to which he belongs. It is believed that a person normally adopts the occupational aspirations and values of the group to which he belongs.¹¹

A **fourth** hypothesis is that a correlation exists between LOA and the extent to which the social circumstances of the person involved produce success in occupationally related areas. This hypothesis is derived from the belief that a person who finds himself in a social situation which frustrates his striving for high vocational goals will in time lower those goals.¹²

Haller and Miller's **fifth** relationship is that a correlation exists between LOA and any personal orientations that tend to produce an experience of success in areas related to occupational behavior. This is simply the idea that the reward of success results in higher LOA than failure.¹³

Sixth, Haller and Miller believe that a correlation exists between a person's LOA and his tendency to act independently. It is thought that people who refuse to break certain group affiliations often experience lower occupational aspirations. This also seems to coincide with the previously mentioned idea of independence training.¹⁴

Last, attention is given to the positive relationship that exists between LOA and the self-concept involving successful achievement orientation. Thus, if a person has a self-concept of himself as an achiever, he constructs his behavior in such a light. The opposite also holds true.

Upon accepting Haller and Miller's first hypothesis that a correlation exists between LOA and occupational achievement, one can begin to combine this information with Rosen's work regarding the Black minority group. A closer look at Haller and Miller's second, third, fourth, and fifth correlates of occupational aspiration goes far in explaining the lack of Black vertical mobility. Where a relationship exists between LOA and success in school, Rosen's work shows that the educational aspirations of the Black are comparable to those of the Greek, Jew, and white Protestant. However, it is sorrowfully evident that until the earlier part of this decade, a large portion of our country's educational opportunities and, therefore, those positions requiring advanced levels of education were not open to Blacks. In effect, what is found is means-behavior operating in reverse and young Blacks viewing high educational aspirations as unrealistic due to their limited success in obtaining higher levels of employment.

Previously, it has been stated that a high correlation exists between a person's LOA and the success orientations of the group to which he belongs. Needless to say, the success orientation of the Black worker, in all but a few areas (most noticeably, sports and entertainment), has been painfully low. The Black worker, in most instances, has a very limited level of group success to strive for and identify with.

Considering the fourth and fifth hypothesis, the belief that a high correlation exists between the social situation of an individual and LOA and that a high correlation exists between any personal orientation tending to produce an experience of success and LOA, Black experiences again seem inadequate. Until the last few years, the Black has been all but frustrated in his level of occupational achievement and consequently has been forced to accept a lower level of occupational aspiration with its accompanying lesser feeling of success. For too long certain job opportunities in much of our country have been available only to a particular group, leaving the most undesirable and lowest paying work to minority group employees.

In considering Haller and Miller's sixth hypothesis that a correlation exists between LOA and the orientation to act independently, one can again refer to Rosen. His study showed that the Blacks scored high in independence training but low in the measure of doing things well or achievement training. Understandably, one realizes that independence training and achievement training are both vital in any measure of occupational success and that the lack of either, especially the latter, has led to many occupational failings on the part of the Blacks.

The seventh and last correlate deals with the relationship between LOA and self-conception. In a sense it is perhaps the most important relationship of all and may provide a key to the present dilemma. Writing in this area, Robert Merton has advanced what he terms the "theory of self-fulfilling prophecies". The prophecy may be defined as "a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true."¹⁵ This prophecy helps explain many of today's racial circumstances. An example of the prophecy may be seen in the person who falsely believes that everyone is his enemy and that he has no friends. Consequently, as he acts on this belief and treats everyone as an enemy, his original belief comes true. The situation of the Black is comparable. After years of being told he was "dumb," "irresponsible," and "incapable," he responded in such a manner that these things often came true, and he even believed them himself.

Conclusion

Just as skilled workers and management act according to their culture and their social and economic systems, so do minority group members.

"The habits of 'shiftlessness,' 'irresponsibility,' lack of 'ambition,' absenteeism, and of quitting the job, which management usually regards as a result of the 'innate' perversity of underprivileged white and Negro workers, are in fact normal responses that the worker has learned from his physical and social environment."¹⁶

Such a system of behavior and response is rational and appropriate in the culture of the person who has come to accept them.

In conclusion, it seems evident that to improve the minority group worker's role, much more than economically and politically, originated development programs are needed. Cultural variables affecting occupational aspirations must be dealt with. Industry must appeal to the self-concept of all its workers and their needs of self-actualization. The minority group worker must re-evaluate his own self-concept and be prepared to make needed adjustments. Occupational aspirations are a result of both prior and present circumstances, and if actions are taken now, changes can be made for the future. The minority group worker must be made aware of new goals and be given a desire to strive for these goals and a means to obtain them.

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