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## Black, White, and Brown Adolescent Alienation

**F. K. HEUSSENSTAMM\***  
**RALPH HOEPFNER**

ALIENATION may exist whenever society, being composed of dominant and subdominant societal groups, creates feelings of anxiety, rootlessness, isolation, and apathy; and this represents the actual condition of life for many contemporary young people. Alienation is a multidimensional construct taken to mean conscious rejection or repudiation by an individual of expected roles representing the values of his society.

Infinite variations of alienation can be described in response to the four questions which follow:

1. Focus: Alienated from what?
2. Replacement: What replaces the old relationship?
3. Mode: How is the alienation manifested? and

4. Agent: What is the agent of the alienation?

Types of alienation include a sense of cosmic outcastness, developmental estrangement, historical loss, and self-estrangement.

It would seem vital to those who engage in direct contact with junior and senior high school students, and to those who are preparing teachers for these institutions, to have an understanding of the internal dynamics of members of the student body and their feelings about the educational experiences in

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which they are engaged. The major question involved in this study, based on cultural stereotypes, was: What demographic characteristics differentiate among young people and correlate with their levels of alienation?

## Instrument Development

In a pilot study, a preliminary version of the *Adolescent Alienation Index* (Heussenstamm, 1971) was designed and tested to determine the existence and extent of alienation as manifested by in-school adolescents. The Rotter I-E Scale was selected for use in the pilot study. Because it had been validated almost entirely with adults, and inasmuch as the language was somewhat staid and formal for younger adolescents, it was utilized to supply criteria for assessing the concurrent validity of the *Adolescent Alienation Index*. The latter consisted originally of 47 forced-choice items written largely to include Seeman's five dimensions of alienation: normlessness, meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-estrangement, and social isolation. The items were written to translate Seeman's dimensions into operational terms and to make them comprehensible to adolescents. For example:

### NORMLESSNESS:

- I don't pay much attention to school rules.
- I try to follow school rules.

### MEANINGLESSNESS:

- I have a clear idea of why I am in school.
- I have never been sure of what we students were really in school for.

### POWERLESSNESS:

- It doesn't do any good to vote in school elections, since the student government has no real voice in running the school.
- It is important to vote in school elections, because student government has a voice in running this school.

### SELF-ESTRANGEMENT:

- I spend a lot of my free time moving around, looking for something to do.
- I usually know what I want to do in my spare time.

### SOCIAL ISOLATION:

- I don't like most people.
- I can usually find some good in everyone.

	N	Mean	S.D.	K-R Rel.
1. Suburban Caucasian HS students	134	10.83	5.47	.797
2. Black Job Corps enrollees	55	13.42	7.91	.890
3. Urban high school students	681	11.89	5.24	.754
4. Urban jr.-sr. high students	221	14.17	5.48	.750
5. Rural Mexican American HS students	137	12.45	5.55	.781

Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics for Five Youth Groups on the Experimental Measure of Alienation

The pilot version was completed by 75 lower division college students. The Rotter I-E Scale was also administered to these subjects. Nondiscriminating items were eliminated from the *Adolescent Alienation Index*, which condensed it to 41 items. Upon application of the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20, a reliability coefficient of .78 was estimated. The correlation between the total score and the Rotter Scale score was +.61.

## Procedure

Five groups of adolescents were examined by means of their responses to a demographic questionnaire and the *Adolescent Alienation Index*. Group 1, a sample of 134 Caucasian males and females, was drawn from a suburban lower middle class four-year Los Angeles County high school. Group 2 consisted of 55 males, all black voluntary enrollees in a Job Corps Center for Men in California. Group 3, 681 males and females, came from a predominantly middle class black south-central Los Angeles high school. Group 4, 221 males and females, came from junior and senior urban high schools selected as the target population for a Coro Foundation teacher education project. Group 5, composed of 137 males and females, all low income Mexican Americans, was evaluated in a rural California school district.

Items suggested in the literature as probably relevant to feelings of alienation in adolescents included sex, age, number of hours of weekly employment, grade point average, socioeconomic status, transiency and stability of family, parental approval of friends, solidarity with peers, and marital status of parents.

Hypotheses involved relationships between these demographic variables and scores on the measure of alienation. The 11

hypotheses and findings relevant to them are described. Supporting statistical data are found in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

## Results

1. *Sex.* Due to differentially applied pressures of society on adolescent males and females, males are more likely to experience alienation than females in school settings. This hypothesis was supported in groups 1 and 4, and indicated, but not significantly, in groups 3 and 5.

2. *Age.* Alienation has often been described as progressive; therefore, the older the subjects, the greater the degree of alienation once the process has begun. This hypothesis was not supported.

3. *Employment.* Hours at work outside of the school setting indicate a focus into the larger community. The greater the number of hours of work, the greater the alienation. This hypothesis was supported and highly significant only for group 3, from a predominantly middle class black high school. We might speculate that rising aspirations when compared with work opportunities strengthen feelings of alienation in black adolescents.

4. *Academic Achievement.* Students' estimates of their grade point average proved to be highly significantly related to alienation scores. The hypothesis, that the higher the grade point average the less the alienation, was supported in all five groups.

Demographic Characteristic	1	2	3	4	5
Sex	-.21*	—	.06	-.14*	-.04
Age	.12	—	.07	.00	.02
Hrs. of work/week	.02	.12	.14*	-.02	.04
Estimate of GPA	-.32**	-.25	-.23**	-.25**	-.32**
Father's education	-.21*	-.38**	.05	.03	-.10
Time at present residence	.11	-.06	.08*	.10	.04
No. of moves in past 5 years	-.16	-.03	-.06	-.16*	.06
Parental approval of friends	-.30**	.06	-.13**	-.29**	-.21
Solidarity with peers	-.33**	.32*	.00	-.19**	-.08
Marital status of parents	-.15	.04	-.17**	-.06	-.14

\* Significant at .05 level. \*\* Significant at .01 level. — Coefficient not computed, as sample was homogeneous on the characteristic.

Figure 2. Correlations Between Demographic Characteristics and Scores on the Experimental Measure of Alienation

Groups	1	2	3	4	5
1.		2.22*			
2.			2.06*	5.56**	2.41*
3.			1.41	0.67	0.93
4.				5.43**	1.08
5.					2.86**

\* Significant at .05 level. \*\* Significant at .01 level. All tests are two-tailed, nondirectional tests.

Figure 3. Z Ratios (Z Tests) Between Groups of Youths on Scores on the Experimental Measure of Alienation

5. *Socioeconomic Status.* Using the father's educational attainment as a measure of societal position, it was hypothesized that the higher the position, the less the alienation. Findings were mixed; the hypothesis was supported and significant only for groups 1 and 2.

6. *Residential Status.* Length of residence at a given address may facilitate the development of family solidarity; therefore, the less the transiency, the less the alienation. This hypothesis was not supported.

7. *Transiency.* The number of changes of residence may also be an indicator of the involvement of the family cohesiveness with the community. Therefore, the less the family transiency, the less the alienation. Findings were significant only for group 4, but trended toward the hypothesis in three other groups.

8. *Parental Approval of Friends.* It was hypothesized that the greater the approval of friends, the less the alienation. The hypothesis was supported in four groups still enrolled in public school. For Job Corps enrollees, all aged 19 or older, the parental-approval variable is no longer significantly related to alienation.

9. *Solidarity with Peers.* The relationship of adolescents to their friends and confidants has been emphasized at length in both sociological and psychological literature. Therefore, the hypothesis was that the greater the cohesiveness with peers, the less the alienation. Findings were inconsistent.

10. *Marital Status of Parents.* As an indicator of family stability, two-parent families may be better able to provide support needed by the adolescent during this critical phase of his development. Therefore,

the greater the family stability as indicated by nonfractionated experience, the less the alienation. The hypothesis was significantly supported for group 3; indicated, but not significantly, for groups 1, 4, and 5; but reversed for group 2. Once again, the older Job Corps enrollees exhibit attitudes not typical of younger peers.

## Conclusions

Those demographic characteristics of adolescents that proved to be most highly significant in relationship to alienation are grade point average, parental approval of friends, and solidarity with peers. Achievement, as validated by rewards from school staff in the form of average or above average grades, reflects approval from significant others—in this case, teachers. Such validating messages received on a regular basis serve to counter or prevent alienation, as measured by the *Adolescent Alienation Index*.

Supportive reinforcement by parents instead of criticisms of youthful selection of cohorts apparently helps prevent alienation. Attack by parents on a major factor of the adolescent's world, specifically his friends, may be interpreted as an intolerable attack

on his person and may negatively influence performance on the *Adolescent Alienation Index*. Another approach to the assessment of the importance of the position of friends in the adolescent's life is measurement of his solidarity or cohesiveness with his peers. In this study, the feeling of being valued by age-mates served to distinguish those low in alienation when compared with those individuals whose scores indicated more marked separation from the system.

Mixed findings on other possible related variables, such as the number of hours of work outside the school, socioeconomic status, and family stability, indicate the need for further exploration of the differences between groups.

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