

HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS  
PERCEIVED AS GROWTH-FACILITATING  
BY THEIR PEERS

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Introduction

A primary goal of individuals involved in the "helping professions", e.g., counselors, social workers, and psychologists, is the facilitation of psychological growth in the people with whom they work. Extensive research has been done in an attempt to discover the means by which this goal can be most fully attained. Most of the existing evidence concerning the necessary conditions for individual growth has come from analysis of counseling interviews conducted in clinics and hospitals.

Various writers [(6), (9), and (13)] have theorized that high similarity exists between effective counseling relationships and good interpersonal relationships in general. Research investigating therapeutic relationships in other than formal settings, however, is limited. Notable exceptions include Alsbrook's studies [(1) and (2)] on health-engendering people, i.e., individuals who promote health in their associates; Carew's investigation (3) of similarities and differences in counseling and friendship relationships, and Miller's examination (12) of behavior perceived as helpful in a college dormitory.

The study reported here was the initial phase of a project carried on at the University of Florida from 1963 to 1965. The overall project examined various aspects of successful interpersonal relationships among high school seniors.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if twelfth grade students could identify, by means of a single criterion question, classmates whom they perceived as growth-facilitating, and, if so, to determine if certain of these students would be perceived as growth-facilitating by their peers in numbers that were significantly beyond chance. Impetus to explore the feasibility of a single criterion question came from Miller's finding that response to one statement, "My Section Adviser is a helpful person." correlated .81 with the total scale score of a lengthy "helping behavior" rating scale.

A second purpose of the study was to investigate attributes perceived as growth-facilitating. Growth was operationally defined as the movement of an individual toward positive mental health. Inherent in the concept of positive mental health is the belief that man has the potential for a level of functioning beyond the mere absence of mental illness. This concept has received a recent emphasis in education and psychology. Authorities have used varying terminology to describe the ultimate in positive health; these include: self-actualization (10), fully functioning (13), adequacy (4), and healthy personality (7). Landsman (8, p.43) states "...we have opened the hidden half of the adjustment continuum, the realm of positive experience."

The subjects for the study were the members of ten homeroom classes, 332 seniors, from a central Florida highschool.

#### Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to the students in each homeroom. Each student was asked to identify other classmates in his homeroom whom he perceived as having made his life seem better. Each person had the opportunity to nominate from none to five classmates. It was left for the student to make his own definition as to what a "better life" meant to him. The second part of the questionnaire asked the student to describe what it was about the person selected number one that caused him or her to exert a positive influence upon the life of the selector. Also, each homeroom teacher was asked to name the five students who, he felt, exerted the greatest positive influence on other class members.

The number of nominations that each student received from his peers was tabulated. The Poisson distribution was used to determine if the number of nominations received by a student was significantly beyond chance. (5)

The free responses the students had made regarding why the chosen person had made their lives seem better were examined by the writer and two graduate students. Each evaluator made a list, in short phrase form, of the characteristics being attributed to the people perceived as growth-facilitating. The three evaluators then met and made a combined list, attempting to include all of the attributes mentioned by the students. It was felt that some overlap in meaning existed among the final list of attributes.

Each evaluator again read the responses and attempted to categorize them according to the developed list. No limit

was placed upon the number of attributes to be checked from a student's total response. A rank order correlation of the attributes as they were checked by rater one and rater two yielded a coefficient of .89; for rater one and rater three the coefficient was .92, and for rater two and rater three the coefficient was .91.

### Results

Two hundred and ninety-three students, 88 per cent of the total sample, nominated one or more classmates as growth-facilitating. The distribution of nominations is shown in Table 1. One hundred and eighty-two persons received one or more nominations; 150 received no nominations. The number of nominations received by 26 students exceeded the chance level of probability at .001. Twenty-one of these 26 students were also nominated by their respective teachers as being among the top five in the student's homeroom class on the "positive influence" variable. Six were nominated number one by their teacher, and four were nominated number two.

The four attributes most often mentioned by the students as describing the growth-facilitating person were, in order according to the number of times checked, (1) friendly, (2) concerned about the feelings of others, (3) gives the appearance of enjoying life, and (4) helpful.

For reporting purposes, it was necessary to analyze the free responses and to place their contents into categories. To afford another prospective, however, with regard to the description of growth-facilitating people, the total responses of eight students are included. These samples were randomly selected.

At the beginning of the school year I felt left out or you might say set aside from the other kids; \_\_\_\_\_'s warm personality gave me an entirely different outlook on people and most of all, studying.

\_\_\_\_\_ is a person that is always smiling; a person that always speaks to everyone. He doesn't leave anyone out. He influences me with his friendliness. I want to be as friendly and considerate as \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ is generally optimistic in her outlook, and even when I feel my worst, she gives me a warmer feeling when I meet her.

Table 1

Distribution of Nominations  
On the Growth-Facilitator Criterion\*

Nominations		Number of Students	
	17		1
	16		1
	13		1
	12		2
	11		2
	10		3
	9		7
	8		9
	7		9
	6		10
	5		11
	4		14
	3		13
	2		31
	1		68
	<u>0</u>		<u>150</u>
Total	660	Total	332

\*The probability of obtaining X nominations was calculated by the Poisson probability formula

$$P(X) = (e^{-\bar{X}} \bar{X}^X) / X!$$

The probability of obtaining 8 or more nominations is less than .001.

It's something I really can't express as thoroughly as I would like about him. He is extremely likeable and agreeable. He's the kind of guy everyone would want for their very best friend or for a brother. He smiles and speaks to everyone, even those he doesn't know.

She has a kind and deep real sense of interest in others. There is nothing false or put-on about her.

He is generous, warm-hearted, and many other things, but most important, he is considerate of others, consequently making him fun to be with.

\_\_\_\_\_ is always happy and outgoing. She spreads this happiness to all those around her.

His main characteristic is a friendly constant smile. He's very understanding and always ready to help you.

#### Discussion

When given the opportunity to respond or not, as they chose, 88 per cent of the subjects nominated one or more classmates as individuals who made them feel that their lives were better. This finding indicates that high school seniors do perceive their lives to be positively influenced by certain of their classmates. Twenty-six students received nominations from eight or more of their classmates. Twenty-one of these 26 were also selected by their teachers as growth-facilitating. Apparently, certain individuals have a life style that is perceived as growth-facilitating both by their peers and by adults.

There was high agreement among the subjects that friendliness is a significant factor in growth-facilitation. Being helpful and considerate of the feelings of others were also considered important. The student apparently perceives a warm, affective attitude on the part of the chosen person directed toward himself. The chooser seems to be saying, "That person cares for me and my life is better because of it."

The adage, "Smile and the world smiles with you," was reinforced. The chosen person was perceived as one who enjoyed life. The subjects reported feeling better when others presented a cheery disposition.

Response by peers to a single global question appears to have utility for identifying growth-facilitating people. The logical extension of this study will be to determine if people perceived as exerting a positive influence upon their peers do, indeed, promote psychological growth. Also, the degree to which the criterion question of this study correlates with other criteria of social acceptability such as popularity and friendship needs to be investigated.

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