

Youth Leadership Preferences

JEROLD W. APPS

To determine if lower socioeconomic rural youth need different types of leaders than do higher socioeconomic rural youth, 10-13 year olds in Adams County, Wisconsin, were asked about their preferences for adult leaders. The study questions revealed (1) the respondents' desire for either a democratic, authoritarian, or laissez-faire leadership style, and (2) their preference concerning personal characteristics of a leader. The results differ somewhat from findings reported in the literature. The author feels that his findings are particularly relevant in regard to rural youth.

ONE OF THE challenges personnel face as they attempt to involve lower socioeconomic rural youth in Extension youth programs is recruitment and training of adult leaders to work with these youth. This article will focus on two questions often asked by Extension personnel:

1. Should a training program for adult leaders who will work with lower socioeconomic rural youth emphasize a different leadership style from that used with higher socioeconomic rural youth?
2. Should a particular set of personal characteristics be considered when recruiting adult leaders for work with lower socioeconomic rural youth?

To seek insights into these questions, a study¹ was conducted in Adams County, Wisconsin, involving 456 youth (ages 10-13). Adams County is a rural low-income area in central Wisconsin with a population of 7566 (1960 census). Approximately 75 per cent of the population lives outside the county's incorporated villages. In 1960, 43 per cent of the families had annual incomes below \$3000 (a national income definition for poverty).

¹Details of this research are reported in Jerold W. Apps, "Style of Adult Leadership and Personal Characteristics Desired in an Adult Leader by Low Socio-Economic Rural Youth" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1967).

JEROLD W. APPS is Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

A socioeconomic status score was determined for all youth involved in the study. The score was based upon information obtained from youth regarding the occupation of the head of house, education of the head of house, and specific family possessions and conveniences. Ninety-nine youth in or near the middle on the socioeconomic scale were classified "average" and eliminated from further analysis. Seven of the remaining 357 were not available for interview. Consequently, 350 were interviewed personally at school. Of these 350, 176 were in the lower socioeconomic group. The remaining 174 were in the higher group.²

Two dimensions of leadership were considered in the study—leadership style and personal characteristics desired in a leader.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Leadership style was defined as being either democratic, authoritarian, or laissez-faire as described by Lippitt and White.³ To measure leadership style desired in a leader, ten situations were developed. For each situation, three alternative solutions were given, each representing a leadership style. Students were asked to select the one solution (leadership style) perceived as most desirable. They were asked to assume that they belonged to a "pretend" club and that this situation occurred in that club. For example, one situation and set of alternative responses was, "You are planning to give a talk on soil conservation at the next meeting of your club. What would you like your leader to do: (1) Have you pick out the material for your talk but help you if you need help? (2) Give you the material for your talk? (3) Have you pick out the material for your talk?" These responses were judged according to leadership style to be (1) democratic, (2) authoritarian, (3) laissez-faire. Those students who indicated a majority of democratic responses to the various situations were assumed to desire a leader with a democratic style of leadership; those with a majority of laissez-faire responses, a laissez-faire leader, etc.

No significant differences were found between lower and higher socioeconomic status rural youth as to style of adult leadership desired. Forty-six per cent of the lower socioeconomic group desired a leader with a democratic style compared to 53 per cent of the

² See Norman O. Everson and Jerold W. Apps, "Reaching Youth in Low-Income Areas," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, V (Winter, 1967), for a further discussion of interviewing procedure used in this study.

³ Ralph White and Ronald Lippitt, "Leader Behavior and Member Reaction in Three 'Social Climates,'" in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, *Group-Dynamics—Research and Theory* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson and Company, 1953), p. 586.

higher socioeconomic status group. Five per cent or less of both groups wanted a leader with an authoritarian style of leadership.

These findings are somewhat contrary to what other writers say. Benne⁴ suggests that for a child brought up in a basically undemocratic home or gang atmosphere, cooperative democratic group behavior will be unfamiliar and may consequently be resisted as a threat to himself. Benne, however, was describing low socioeconomic status youth in general without any reference to residence. Findings from the Adams County study suggest that low socioeconomic status *rural* youth are as interested in democratic leadership as are higher socioeconomic status *rural* youth.

Boys and girls were compared as to the style of leadership they desired. Within the lower socioeconomic status group, 57 per cent of the girls preferred democratic leadership compared to only 36 per cent of the boys. This difference was not evident among boys and girls in the high socioeconomic status group. Again, within the lower socioeconomic status group, a greater number of boys than girls (36 per cent compared to 16 per cent) preferred a laissez-faire leader. This difference did not exist among boys and girls in the high socioeconomic status group.

There were no differences between lower and higher socioeconomic status *rural* youth for the factors: grade in school, residence, number of people living in respondent's home, membership in 4-H, and organizational participation.

PERSONAL LEADER-CHARACTERISTICS DESIRED

Personal characteristics refer to a leader's (1) skills and talents—ability in carpentry, food preparation, etc.; (2) social skills—ability to lead singing, square dancing, etc.; (3) kindness and helpfulness; (4) respect for young people; (5) physical characteristics—good looks, tallness, etc.; and (6) authoritativeness.

To determine which personal characteristics the respondents desired in an adult, they were asked to name one they would like to have as the leader of a club to which they might belong. Then the respondents were asked to describe this adult and indicate why they would like him or her as a club leader. These responses were then placed into the categories of personal characteristics.

More higher than lower socioeconomic status *rural* youth wanted a leader with specific skills and talents. More higher than lower socioeconomic *rural* youth wanted a leader with specific social skills.

⁴ Kenneth Benne, "Leaders Are Made, Not Born," *Childhood Education*, XXIV (January, 1948), 203-208.

No differences were found between lower and higher socioeconomic status rural youth for the other personal characteristics studied: kindness and helpfulness, respect for young people, physical characteristics, and authoritative. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Preferences of low/high socioeconomic status youth for certain personal characteristics of adult leaders by per cent of respondents, Adams County, Wisconsin, 1966.

Personal characteristic desired	Socioeconomic status			
	Lower (N-176)		Higher (N-174)	
	yes	no	yes	no
Skills and talents	48%	52%	59%	41%
Social skills	27	73	40	60
Kindness and helpfulness	64	36	72	28
Respect for young people	18	82	14	86
Physical characteristics	11	89	14	86
Authoritativeness	16	84	18	82

The personal characteristic of kindness and helpfulness was desired most by both lower and higher socioeconomic status groups. A desire for particular physical characteristics was mentioned least by both groups.

Riessman⁵ indicates that lower socioeconomic status youth (1) desire someone on whom they can depend, (2) desire honest love and affection, (3) desire physical, less word-ridden teachers, and (4) approve of "masculine," strong-type individuals as teachers. The findings of this research do not support Riessman's contention that low socioeconomic status youth desire adult leadership with particular kinds of physical characteristics—e.g., "masculine, strong-type." However, this research does agree with the other characteristics he deemed important for teachers of low socioeconomic youth.

In a needs and interest study⁶ of 11 to 13 year old Boys' Club members (at the time of the study 63 per cent of the fathers of Boys' Club members were in low socioeconomic status occupation classifications), the boys were asked to finish the following sentence: "I wish our Boys' Club leader. . . ." The most often expressed wishes were that he (1) would do something for me/us (29 per cent), (2) would be more helpful (16 per cent), and (3) had more help or time (11 per cent). The Boys' Club research supports the

⁵ Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), pp. 81-97.

⁶ Boys' Clubs of America, *Needs and Interests Study of 11-12-13 Year-Old Boys' Club Members* (New York: Boys' Clubs of America, 1963).

findings of this study even though the Boys' Club membership consisted of only urban boys.

An analysis of just the low socioeconomic status group in this study revealed the following: (1) more low socioeconomic status seventh and eighth graders wanted a leader with social skills than did those in fifth and sixth grades, (2) those youth who were or had been 4-H members wanted a leader with the personal characteristic of authoritativeness more often than did those youth who had not been 4-H members. These differences were not true among higher socioeconomic rural youth.

CONCLUSIONS

Socioeconomic status is not related to the desire for a particular style of adult leadership by rural youth. When three styles of leadership were compared, both higher and lower socioeconomic status rural youth preferred a democratic style of leadership.

There are few differences between lower and higher socioeconomic status rural youth as to the personal characteristics they desire in a leader. All youth studied wanted most a leader who was kind and helpful. However, lower socioeconomic rural youth did not want leaders with social skills or with specific skills and talents as often as higher socioeconomic rural youth.

Major modifications in volunteer leader recruitment should not be necessary for Extension youth programs dealing with low socioeconomic rural youth in areas like those considered in this study. Perhaps there is a mistaken feeling by some leaders in rural areas that lower and higher socioeconomic status youth cannot be reached with similar leadership approaches. The findings of this study indicate that such feelings are unfounded.

The reader should be cautioned, however. This study was conducted in a rural area in Wisconsin where the general socioeconomic level was quite low, and where socioeconomic status differences among families were not extreme. In areas where the general socioeconomic status of rural families is high and where there is a more extreme difference between low and high socioeconomic status, different conclusions might be reached. In areas of relatively extreme differences in socioeconomic status it may not be possible to recruit adult leadership that will be effective for work with both groups.