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"He is full of potentialities, visions of the future, and questions concerning his fulfillment of himself"  
- A. Laverne Dickerson

# The Youth Conservation Corps and Adolescents' Self-concept

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**ABSTRACT.** Four dimensions of self-concept were measured at the beginning and the end of the Youth Conservation Corps's 1971 pilot program. The overall evaluation of the program had found no changes in self-concept, but factor analysis identified some significant differences. The campers' perceptions of their adequacy decreased, while their perceptions of their personal worth and social skills increased. These changes differed with the sex, age, and family income of the participants and with the type, location, sponsoring agency, and management style of the camps.

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## INTRODUCTION

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT in the development and management of a Federal social program that a special effort be made to assess its success and failures. We need to learn answers to such questions as: Were the program's objectives stated clearly? Did the program meet the needs of its participants and society?

The overall evaluation of the 1971 Youth Conservation Corps pilot program has been published (*Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972*). One of the recommendations made was a closer look at the dimensions of self-concept. This has been done (*Dickerson 1973*) and some of the findings are presented here with the hope that those interested in children, nature, and the urban environment will find in them some insights, hunches, or ideas.

## BACKGROUND

The Youth Conservation Corps was established in the Departments of Agriculture and Interior when the 91st Congress approved Public Law 91-378 on August 13, 1970. During the summer of 1971, approximately 2,400 youth of both sexes, ages 15 to 18, from all social, economic, and racial groups participated in the YCC program. The camps were located in 38

states and the District of Columbia. The sponsoring agencies and the number of camps they were responsible for were: In the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 3; Bureau of Land Management, 2; Bureau of Reclamation, 4; Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, 12; National Park Service, 9; and in the Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 34. There were 33 coed camps, 8 female camps, and 23 male camps. Fourteen of the camps were non-residential. Thirty-eight residential camps were open 7 days a week and 12 residential camps operated 5 days a week. Duration of camp sessions and the number of camps with each length of session were: 4 weeks: 6, 7 weeks: 4, 8 weeks: 49, and 9 to 12 weeks: 5.

Eight objectives, originating from Section 1 of Public Law 91-378, were adopted by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior at the beginning of the program: Two concerned work accomplishment, two environmental learning, and four personal and social development. A detailed description of this cooperative effort may be found elsewhere (*Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972; Dickerson 1973*).

## SELF-CONCEPT

What is self-concept? There is no unanimity

about the meaning of the term or its theoretical foundation. The interrelatedness of self as both object and process is discussed in the writings of many. (For a detailed discussion, see *Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972*.) Here, self-concept is viewed as the way of looking at and thinking about those aspects of his person that the individual perceives and toward which he develops opinions and attitudes (*Dewey and Humber 1966*). The adolescent is at the stage of development where he is deeply concerned with such questions as: Who am I? What will I become? What kind of work will I do? Why am I having problems with my friends? In short, feelings, thoughts, and behavior at this stage are mainly determined by concept of self. "Whatever the self is, it becomes a center, an anchorage point, a standard of comparison, an ultimate real. Inevitably, it takes place as a supreme value." (*Murphy 1947: 536*).

Rapid physical changes accompanied by internal physiological and psychological changes intensify the adolescent's concern with self, regardless of his socioeconomic or cultural background. And if these changes are not enough, ambiguities in our society confound his concept of self. One moment he is treated like a child; the next moment he is expected to act as an adult. His social duties and responsibilities may be those of an adult while his social rights and privileges may be those of a child. Criminal and violent behavior abounds, yet we speak of morals and ethics. All of these add to the adolescent's confusion about himself. He is full of potentialities, visions of the future, and questions concerning his fulfillment of himself. This is an interesting time of life at which to study self-concept; body changes and important life decisions are intensifying the awareness of and concern with the concept of self.

I believe that experience with natural environments can help the adolescent improve his concept of himself.

Three of the four personal and social development objectives of the YCC program formed the basis for selecting the dimensions of self-concept to be examined in this research:

1. To acquire increased self-dignity.
2. To acquire increased self-discipline.
3. To better work with and relate to peers and adults.

Self-dignity, self-discipline, and relationships with peers and adults are important objectives,

especially for an age group whose attempts at social differentiation and integration appear to be directed by such value themes as acceptance, self-identification, and intimacy (*Gordon 1971: 832*). Searching the literature for instruments applicable to this study, we became aware that most researchers on self-concept found these dimensions of personality to be relatively basic and therefore stable over time. (*Bachman 1970, Brownfain 1952, Taylor 1953, Engel 1956*). Therefore, if any changes took place during this study, they would be quite significant.

There are four ways to measure changes in self-dignity, self-discipline, and relationships with peers and adults. The first identifies and measures observable behavioral responses related to these attributes; the second measures the individual's perceptions of himself; the third measures other peoples' perceptions of the individual; and the fourth measures some combination of the first three. Because time, money, and personnel were limited, the second method was selected—measuring what the individual thinks of himself, at the beginning and at the end of the YCC Experience.

The following are working definitions of the dimensions of self-concept:

*Self-esteem* is "an evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a *personal* judgment of the worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself." (*Coopersmith 1967: 4-5*).

*Self-development* is the degree to which a person had developed his positively valued abilities and potentialities into skills and competencies. (*French and Kahn 1962*).

*Social skills: peers* refers to the individual's perception and evaluation of his acceptance by others of his own age.

*Social skills: adults* refers to the individuals perception and evaluation of the worth of adults, and his understanding of and his acceptance by them.

To measure these dimensions, I asked YCC participants to respond to 45 statements at the beginning and at the end of their experience. Five responses were offered, ranging from "almost always true" to "never true". Numbers

from 1 to 5 were assigned to each of the responses in such a way that a higher score would reflect more positive self-perception. The total score on each of the five dimensions of self-concept was the sum of the scores on each item in the dimension. For example, if a dimension was measured by seven items, the total score would range from 7 to 35. An explanation of how these instruments were designed can be found in *Youth and the Environment* (Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972).

## ANALYSIS

Factor analysis of responses to the 45 statements suggested the following dimensions of self-concept:

*Personal worth* is a way of looking at and thinking about valued personal abilities and potentials, ones the individual perceives and toward which he develops opinions and attitudes that contribute to his feelings of self-worth (includes 21 statements).

*Adequacy* is a way of looking at and thinking about valued personal abilities and potentials, ones the individual perceives and toward which he develops opinions and attitudes by comparing them with certain standards he has set for himself (six statements).

*Social skills: adults* and *Social skills: peers* retained the definitions presented earlier (six and seven statements respectively).

Research has shown that an organization's style of management and its attention to the personal values of its members influence their performance and their satisfaction with the organization (Likert 1967). Therefore, the final questionnaire included several questions about camp administration and organization. A single index was constructed, the Participation-Interpersonal Relations Index (PIRI) (Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972) to combine adolescents' perceptions of (1) the extent to which they participated in governing their camp, and (2) the degree of friendliness, confidence, trust, willingness to communicate, and supportiveness shown by the camp's staff.

Twelve characteristics of the adolescent and the camp were considered. Adolescent characteristics were sex, age, race, family income, and place of residence. Family income was categorized by the adolescent as under \$5,000; \$5,000 to \$9,999; \$10,000 to 14,999; or \$15,000

and over. Each participant categorized his place of residence as urban (cities of more than 100,000), suburban (small cities or towns of less than 100,000), or rural. Camp characteristics were sponsoring agency, coed or non-coed, residential or nonresidential, size, length of session, region where located, and PIRI.

With 12 independent variables (adolescent and camp characteristics) and 4 dependent variables (self-concept dimensions), some of the cells in the matrix had too few responses for multivariate analysis. Simple analysis of covariance was used instead.

## RESULTS

Five characteristics of the subjects and seven characteristics of the camps were expected to correlate with variations in adolescents' self-concepts. F-ratios, the results of analysis of covariance, were computed for the four dimensions of self-concept. Significant relationships are presented in table 1.

Scores on the *personal worth* scale were correlated with age, sponsoring agency, session length, and PIRI. *Adequacy* scores showed significant differences on one adolescent characteristic and four camp characteristics: family income, residential or nonresidential camp, sponsoring agency, region, and session length. Three characteristics were significantly related to differences in scores on social skills: adults: session length, PIRI, and residential or nonresidential camp. *Social skills: peers* scores revealed significant differences for the variables sex, coed or non-coed camp, sponsoring agency, session length, and PIRI.

The overall evaluation of the YCC program (Marans, Driver, and Scott 1972) found no change in self-concept as a result of the experience. But as shown above, the factor analysis that collapsed five self-concept dimensions into four identified some significant differences among both adolescent and camp characteristics. A look at the subgroups of characteristics that showed significant differences can give us some clues to the variation.

### Personal Worth

Participants at Forest Service camps showed the most growth in feelings of personal worth (see table 2). Decreases were recorded at camps

**Table 1.—Significance of relationships between characteristics of camper and camp, and four aspects of self-concept (F-Ratio)**

| Characteristic             | Personal worth | Adequacy | Social skills: adults | Social skills: peers |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Camper                     |                |          |                       | **                   |
| Sex                        | *              |          |                       |                      |
| Age                        |                |          |                       |                      |
| Race                       |                |          |                       |                      |
| Size of place              |                | *        |                       |                      |
| Family income              |                |          |                       |                      |
| Camp                       |                |          |                       | *                    |
| Sponsoring agency          | **             | **       |                       | **                   |
| Coed/non-coed              | *              | **       | *                     | **                   |
| Session length             |                | ***      | ***                   |                      |
| Residential/nonresidential |                |          |                       |                      |
| Camp size                  | **             |          | *                     | **                   |
| PIRI                       |                | **       |                       |                      |
| Camp region                |                |          |                       |                      |

\*p ≥ .05  
 \*\*p ≥ .01  
 \*\*\*p ≥ .001

**Table 2.—Scores on "personal worth" before and after camp, by age of camper and camp variables**

| Variable                             | Before |        | After  |        | Difference | N    |
|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|------|
|                                      | Mean   | SD     | Mean   | SD     |            |      |
| Age                                  |        |        |        |        |            |      |
| 15                                   | 81.075 | 10.515 | 80.335 | 11.043 | -0.740     | 307  |
| 16                                   | 81.624 | 10.085 | 81.921 | 10.935 | 0.297      | 391  |
| 17                                   | 81.506 | 9.846  | 82.328 | 10.047 | 0.822      | 326  |
| 18                                   | 82.292 | 8.230  | 82.689 | 9.086  | 0.397      | 106  |
| Sponsoring agency                    |        |        |        |        |            |      |
| Bureau of Indian Affairs             | 76.969 | 10.531 | 75.750 | 11.648 | -1.219     | 56   |
| Bureau of Land Management            | 82.265 | 7.856  | 81.676 | 10.057 | -0.589     | 34   |
| Bureau of Reclamation                | 81.917 | 9.546  | 82.531 | 8.762  | 0.614      | 96   |
| Bureau of Sports Fisheries, Wildlife | 79.984 | 10.024 | 79.197 | 10.546 | -0.787     | 127  |
| Forest Service                       | 81.880 | 9.883  | 82.538 | 10.387 | 0.658      | 692  |
| National Park Service                | 82.592 | 10.406 | 81.456 | 11.447 | -1.136     | 125  |
| Session length                       |        |        |        |        |            |      |
| 4 weeks                              | 82.193 | 9.432  | 83.467 | 10.023 | 1.274      | 212  |
| 8 weeks                              | 81.388 | 10.081 | 81.293 | 10.593 | -0.095     | 836  |
| 12 weeks                             | 80.902 | 10.230 | 81.000 | 11.391 | 0.098      | 82   |
| PIRI                                 |        |        |        |        |            |      |
| Low                                  | 80.853 | 10.350 | 79.620 | 11.137 | -1.233     | 292  |
| Medium                               | 81.328 | 10.067 | 81.803 | 10.609 | 0.475      | 543  |
| High                                 | 82.471 | 9.354  | 83.492 | 9.571  | 1.021      | 295  |
| Overall average                      | 81.504 | 9.971  | 81.680 | 10.575 | 0.176      | 1130 |

run by four agencies; the greatest decrease was at Bureau of Indian Affairs camps. Could different policies and procedures have affected these scores?

Decreases in personal worth felt by the 15-year-old participants could be the result of immaturity. Older participants usually performed better in work, recreation, and social situations. These successes seem to have produced feelings

of pride and self-worth for many of the 17-year-olds. Could it be that the 15-year-olds judged themselves by the values of the entire group and that their judgments reflected their low status in that group?

The participants in 4-week camps showed a greater increase in *personal worth* scores than participants in either shorter or longer camps. Although this has not been reported previously



in the literature, I have observed that campers' apathy seems to increase after 4 weeks in camp.

The greatest significant difference for *personal worth* was associated with PIRI.

### Adequacy

Most of the changes in *adequacy* scores were negative (see table 3). Could these changes reflect unrealistic expectations generated by the selection procedures? Perhaps the thrill of being chosen (often as the only representative of a school) elevated participants and encouraged them to formulate plans to solve major environmental problems. Even though they developed and implemented plans to solve problems and completed many important projects, the reality was that many things still needed to be accomplished and some problems were too complex for quick solutions. This speculation is based on personal conversations with participants in northeastern and northwestern camps. The general theme was that much more needed to be done to improve

and maintain the natural environment than had been anticipated.

### Social skills: adults

The participants in 12-week camps showed the greatest increase in this dimension. It seems that time enabled them to understand the adults in their environment better (see table 4.)

The closeness of the nonresident camp staff to the participants while they were trying to overcome obstacles seemed to influence the participants' perceptions of adult relationships. Medium participation in camp governance and involvement in planning and problem solving (PIRI) provided the best climate for changes in adult relationships.

### Social skills: peers

There was a significant increase in girls' perceptions of *social skills: peers* (see table 5). Evidently girls are more concerned than boys with their relations with peers. Rosenberg's study verified this finding:

**Table 3.—Scores on "adequacy" before and after camp, by family income and camp variables**

| Variable                             | Before |       | After  |       | Difference | N    |
|--------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------------|------|
|                                      | Mean   | SD    | Mean   | SD    |            |      |
| Family income                        |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| Under \$5,000                        | 21.371 | 3.574 | 21.067 | 3.685 | -0.304     | 105  |
| \$5,000-\$9,999                      | 22.224 | 3.310 | 21.619 | 3.626 | -0.605     | 357  |
| \$10,000-\$14,999                    | 22.558 | 3.080 | 22.391 | 3.198 | -0.167     | 353  |
| \$15,000 and over                    | 22.337 | 3.228 | 21.971 | 3.421 | -0.366     | 315  |
| Sponsoring agency                    |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| Bureau of Indian Affairs             | 20.714 | 3.489 | 19.893 | 3.535 | -0.821     | 52   |
| Bureau of Land Management            | 23.059 | 2.741 | 22.176 | 3.546 | 0.883      | 34   |
| Bureau of Reclamation                | 21.948 | 3.537 | 22.656 | 3.340 | 0.708      | 96   |
| Bureau of Sports Fisheries, Wildlife | 22.291 | 3.239 | 21.520 | 3.527 | 0.771      | 127  |
| Forest Service                       | 22.289 | 3.160 | 22.176 | 3.202 | -0.113     | 692  |
| National Park Service                | 22.968 | 3.360 | 21.064 | 4.304 | -1.904     | 125  |
| Session length                       |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| 4 weeks                              | 21.741 | 3.314 | 21.811 | 3.037 | 0.070      | 212  |
| 8 weeks                              | 22.353 | 3.241 | 22.000 | 3.471 | -0.353     | 836  |
| 12 weeks                             | 22.939 | 3.077 | 21.207 | 4.305 | -1.73      | 82   |
| Resident/non-resident                |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| Residential                          | 22.170 | 3.277 | 21.900 | 3.378 | -0.270     | 943  |
| Nonresidential                       | 22.840 | 3.088 | 21.941 | 3.886 | -0.899     | 187  |
| Camp region                          |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| North                                | 22.131 | 3.343 | 22.677 | 3.360 | -0.454     | 390  |
| South                                | 22.515 | 3.481 | 21.611 | 4.012 | -0.904     | 262  |
| West                                 | 22.274 | 3.044 | 22.257 | 3.192 | -0.017     | 478  |
| Overall average                      | 22.281 | 3.254 | 21.907 | 3.465 | -0.374     | 1130 |

**Table 4.—Scores on “social skills: adults” before and after camp, by camp variables.**

| Variable             | Before |       | After  |       | Difference | N    |
|----------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------------|------|
|                      | Mean   | SD    | Mean   | SD    |            |      |
| Session length       |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| 4 weeks              | 20.316 | 3.348 | 20.670 | 3.209 | 0.354      | 212  |
| 8 weeks              | 20.367 | 3.670 | 20.695 | 3.757 | 0.328      | 836  |
| 12 weeks             | 19.829 | 3.845 | 21.183 | 4.292 | 1.354      | 82   |
| Resident/nonresident |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| Residential          | 20.403 | 3.635 | 20.749 | 3.675 | 0.346      | 943  |
| Nonresidential       | 19.893 | 3.550 | 20.610 | 3.843 | 0.717      | 187  |
| PIRI                 |        |       |        |       |            |      |
| Low                  | 20.363 | 3.792 | 20.428 | 3.868 | 0.065      | 292  |
| Medium               | 20.252 | 3.652 | 20.877 | 3.876 | 0.625      | 543  |
| High                 | 20.397 | 3.408 | 20.742 | 3.159 | 0.345      | 295  |
| Overall average      | 20.319 | 3.624 | 20.726 | 3.702 | 0.407      | 1130 |

**Table 5.—Scores on “social skills: peers” before and after camp, by sex and camp variables**

| Variable                             | Pre-test |       | Post-test |       | Difference | N    |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-------|-----------|-------|------------|------|
|                                      | Mean     | SD    | Mean      | SD    |            |      |
| Sex                                  |          |       |           |       |            |      |
| Boys                                 | 26.361   | 4.104 | 26.344    | 4.104 | -0.017     | 687  |
| Girls                                | 26.718   | 4.039 | 27.097    | 4.090 | 0.379      | 443  |
| Sponsoring agency                    |          |       |           |       |            |      |
| Bureau of Indian Affairs             | 26.250   | 4.060 | 25.911    | 3.604 | -0.339     | 56   |
| Bureau of Land Management            | 26.412   | 3.831 | 27.297    | 4.509 | 0.882      | 34   |
| Bureau of Reclamation                | 26.198   | 4.017 | 26.656    | 3.641 | 0.458      | 96   |
| Bureau of Sports Fisheries, Wildlife | 26.315   | 4.231 | 26.047    | 4.491 | -0.268     | 127  |
| Forest Service                       | 26.577   | 4.041 | 26.832    | 4.120 | 0.255      | 692  |
| National Park Service                | 26.640   | 4.317 | 26.304    | 4.072 | -0.336     | 125  |
| Coed/non-Coed                        |          |       |           |       |            |      |
| Coed                                 | 26.351   | 4.171 | 26.645    | 4.112 | 0.294      | 643  |
| Girls                                | 27.022   | 3.926 | 27.607    | 3.929 | 0.585      | 135  |
| Boys                                 | 26.574   | 3.964 | 26.256    | 4.134 | -0.318     | 352  |
| Session length                       |          |       |           |       |            |      |
| 4 weeks                              | 26.528   | 4.179 | 27.259    | 4.152 | 0.731      | 212  |
| 8 weeks                              | 26.494   | 4.004 | 26.548    | 4.069 | 0.007      | 836  |
| 12 weeks                             | 26.024   | 4.578 | 25.963    | 4.327 | -0.061     | 82   |
| PIRI                                 |          |       |           |       |            |      |
| Low                                  | 26.397   | 4.043 | 25.990    | 4.125 | -0.407     | 292  |
| Medium                               | 26.494   | 4.191 | 26.691    | 4.203 | 0.197      | 543  |
| High                                 | 26.617   | 3.918 | 27.186    | 3.853 | 0.569      | 295  |
| Overall average                      | 26.501   | 4.080 | 26.639    | 4.113 | 0.138      | 1130 |

While boys and girls are both highly concerned with being well-liked by others, girls more consistently give this value top priority. They are more likely to stress values of interpersonal harmony and success (likeable; easy to get along with; friendly, sociable, and pleasant; a person who knows how to get along well with all kinds of people; well-liked by many different people). (1965: 254)

Campers at Bureau of Land Management camps showed the greatest gains in perceptions

of *social skills: peers*. Campers at Bureau of Reclamation and Forest Service camps were second and third respectively. These agencies differed in the proportions of time devoted to social and recreation activities and to work and educational activities.

There was a negative relationship between length of camp session and *social skills: peers*.

The high motivation, enthusiasm, and zest for fellow campers waned after 4 weeks.

Participants in camps with high PIRI demonstrated growth in peer perceptions. Participation and leadership in these camps took place in informal groups, teams, and work gangs. The pleasure of human association with peers was enhanced by success in helping to plan the camp program. The interpersonal portion of the PIRI reflects the way significant others (camp staff) supported, trusted, and showed confidence in the participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

Working to improve the environment through the YCC program changed certain dimensions of participants' self-concepts. Decreased perceptions of adequacy and increased perceptions of *personal worth, social skills: adults, and social skills: peers* were noted at the end of the program. These changes differed with sex, age, and family income of participants and with the type, location, sponsoring agency, and participation-interpersonal relations index (PIRI) of the camp.

Certain dimensions of self-concept appear to change over a short time. The casual atmosphere, the purpose of the YCC program, and the informal relationships with adults and peers at the camps seemed to affect the four dimensions of self-concept measured in this study. It seems logical that over a longer period of time, changes in parts of a whole should bring about a change in the whole.

The YCC program has many values other than enhancing selected dimensions of self-concept. The program serves as a type of career education, exposing young men and women to careers in forestry, resource management, and the sciences. It also helps to improve the environment and maintain our natural resources, and that is very important.

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