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CONSTRUING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: AN
EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL CLIMATE OF HIGH
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AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL CLIMATE OF HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY

by

Linda S. Marinaccio

A DISSERTATION

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The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
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Department of Psychology

Under the Supervision of Professor A. W. Landfield

Lincoln, Nebraska

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TITLE

Construing the Classroom Environment: An examination
of the social climate of high school classrooms from the
perspective of Personal Construct Theory

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PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the social context of a number of high school classrooms from the perspective of Personal Construct theory. More specifically, the aim of the study was to provide a description of the social environment of the classroom as perceived by its occupants using their own constructions. The relationship of individual perceptions to group perceptions of the classroom environment was explored from the alternate perspectives of problems in the class, social constructions of class members and the social climate. Of particular interest were the relationships between how an individual was viewed by others and how he/she viewed the social context in the classroom.

This chapter will provide an introduction to several areas of research relevant to the present study: social climate, classroom environments, and Personal Construct theory. Background information in these diverse areas will be provided in order to help the reader in an understanding of their synthesis into this particular investigation. Some of the literature reviewed is included to provide the reader with an overview of a complex area; other studies are directly relevant to the design of this particular study. The study will depend heavily upon Personal Construct methodology and research, and will attempt to combine this with the more traditional measures of social climate.

The following sections will review appropriate published literature in a number of areas relevant to the study. First, the author will review studies on environmental climates. Next, the relevant literature on classrooms will be reviewed. Peer relationships and teacher-student relationships will be emphasized. Literature relevant to problems in the classroom will be examined. The notion of "fit" or congruence

between the individual and social systems will be introduced, and its relevance for the present study explained. Finally, a review of Personal Construct theory will be presented with an overview of how this theory may be particularly useful for understanding the "interaction effect" of situation and individual. Personal Construct research relevant to the present investigation will be considered.

Following the review of relevant literature, the purposes of the study will be explained and the issues to be addressed by the study will be discussed. Finally, the hypotheses and specific predictions for the study will be summarized.

Importance of Environment

The study of situational factors which influence human behavior has long been recognized as important in understanding and predicting behavior (Mischel, 1968). Social psychologists, in particular, have attempted to study the context in which behavior occurs in an effort to explain differences which occur between different situations. Barker (1968) and his associates have suggested taking an ecological perspective, that is, recognizing the physical, behavioral, and organizational structure within which behavior occurs. The focus of many of these studies has been on the structure of particular organizations and situations, and the effect this structure has on individuals. It has become clear, however, that neither "environmental" variables nor "personality" variables alone can account for enough variance to adequately explain individual behavior.

In educational settings, the focus has often been on "personality" variables; for example, investigators have explored the relationship of student characteristics such as anxiety with variables such as academic performance. In recognition that the teacher plays an important

role in the educative process, studies have focused on such variables as the relationships of teacher characteristics (such as needs) with the student's academic performance.

Within the last few decades, however, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the situational context on the behavior of its participants. Trickett and Todd (1972), for example, suggest that

The greater the number and variety of persons who exhibit a behavior in a setting (and not others), the more appropriate it seems to identify characteristics of the setting which might be causative (p. 31).

Trickett and Moos (1970) note the importance of the interaction of situational and individual variables, but suggest that what is needed is "systematic data about the context" in order to improve predictions.

With respect to classroom behavior they state:

. . .the important empirical issue is the degree to which classroom behavior is a function of individual differences, setting or classroom differences and the interaction of student and classroom (Trickett & Moos, p. 375).

Their own study indicates a greater proportion of variance accounted for by the interaction of student and class variables (between 30-60% of variance) than by either student variables or class variables alone. Differences in the percentage of variance attributed to different sources varies, however, depending upon the response dimensions (dependent variables) measured.

Certainly the interaction of environmental factors and individual factors plays an important role in predicting behavior; however, Moos (Trickett & Moos, 1973) argues that in order to understand and measure this interaction adequately, it is necessary to find ways of measuring the environment. To this end Moos and his associates direct their research efforts toward the measurement of a number of different "climates."

The Notion of "Climate"

As Moos notes in one of his reviews of climate research (1973), climate represents only one way of looking at the environment. Others include: 1) ecological perspective, 2) behavior settings, 3) organizational structure dimension, 4) personal and behavioral characteristics of milieu inhabitants, and 5) functional or reinforcement analysis of environments. A more complete review of these methods is presented in Moos (1973). The underlying assumption of the notion of "climate" is that just as different individuals have different "personalities," different environments also have different characteristics.

Arising out of Murray's (1938) needs-press model, the assumption is made (Trickett & Moos, 1974) "that environments exercise meaningful coercive power over their members. . .they have certain 'demand characteristics' which influence the participants in these environments" (p. 1).

As Moos and his associates (Trickett & Moos, 1974) define "climate," the perceptions of its participants are paramount, thus, "the environment of a particular setting is defined by the shared perceptions of members of that setting along a number of environmental 'dimensions'" (p. 2). What this author finds particularly useful in this definition is the notion of the involvement of individuals at the level of defining the meaning of a particular climate. As will be discussed in a later section, this notion fits well with a Personal Construct perspective. Further, it seems less of a jump from climate as defined by shared perceptions of its participants to "interactional variables."

Moos (1973) argues that a person's perception of the environment is not really a function of his/her personality traits. As he points out,

. . .there are some relationships between individual personality and/or background characteristics of subjects and their perceptions

of the environment, but these relationships are not usually very substantial. It is also unclear to what extent they reflect differences in the sub-environments actually experienced by individuals. . . (p. 27).

Moos goes on, however, to suggest that the role position an individual holds in that environment may have a mediating effect on personality variables as they relate to environmental perceptions.

One of the criticisms which Moos' definition of climate receives has to do with the subjectivity of persons' perceptions about environment. Moos (1973) counters this argument by suggesting that

. . . it is simply not known whether judgments of social climate dimensions by objective observers relate more highly to relevant outcome criteria than do the perceptions of environmental participants themselves. . . . The author's own guess is that subjective global perceptions of social climate will fare relatively well, since it is these global impressions which individuals remember and take into account in making major decisions about their lives (p. 28-29).

Measurement of Climate

General Considerations: A number of methods and instruments have been derived for measuring the climate of particular organizations. Nielsen and Kirk (1974) provide a good review of climate instruments used within classrooms, and thus the variety of instruments will not be discussed in any detail here. Essentially, the two most popular ways of assessing classroom environments have been through observation and questionnaire surveys. In addition to the method used to obtain information, investigators differ on the degree of inference demanded from their respondents. Rosenshine (1970) makes a distinction between "low inference" and "high inference" responses. Low inference responses tap specific, directly observable phenomena in the environment, such as counting the number of times a teacher says "good," or asking students if a teacher ever allows discussion. High inference responses require "a judgment about the meaning of what is going on around him and of what

he thinks or feels about it" (Nielsen & Kirk, 1974, p. 58).

Observational measures are often quite time consuming, can only measure a time-limited sample of the environment and, as such, may miss the "subtle" cues which may influence participants in that environment. Self-report measures are usually more easily administered and scored. Nielson & Kirk (1974) suggest, however, that because of the high inference level usually involved in self-report measures, test validation is often a problem. They state,

Researchers often make a great leap of logic when they assume that their intended meaning and feeling for the items is the same as that of the respondents. One student's "open" environment may be another's "chaotic" one, resulting in different learning consequences, although both may answer items on constraints in the environment in much the same way (p. 68).

This point will be discussed at greater length in a later section; however, one should keep in mind that a particular questionnaire item may have a different meaning for different individuals. The problem that this fact poses for research is that the dimensions which are super-imposed upon any group of items represents the investigator's inferences as to what that group of items means to all respondents. This study attempts to respond to this difficulty by moving in the direction of greater use of the personal language and meaning systems of the participants within the environment.

Classroom Environment Scale. Moos and his associates (Moos, 1974) have developed a number of social climate scales to measure a variety of different environments. To date they have developed nine different social climate scales which represent four different "categories of environments": 1) treatment environments, 2) total institutions, 3) educational environments, and 4) community settings (Moos, 1974).

Each of the Social Climate Scales has three basic forms, consisting

of a number of true-false statements.

- 1) The Real Form (Form R) asks people how they perceive their current social environment.
- 2) The Ideal Form (Form I) asks people how they conceive of an ideal social environment.
- 3) The Expectations Form (Form E) asks prospective members of an environment what they expect the environment they are about to enter to be like (p. 7).

The Classroom Environment Scale developed by Trickett & Moos (1973, 1974) measures the social climate of junior and senior high school classrooms. Starting from a conceptual and empirical review of published literature, Trickett & Moos (1973) delineate three general sets of variables.

First were interpersonal variables, which include affective aspects of student-student and teacher-student interactions. Second were system maintenance and system change variables involving aspects of the "constitution of the classroom" and teaching innovations. Here the emphasis was on structural aspects of the classroom. Explicit recognition was given to the fact that the role of the teacher involves both friendship functions (relationship variable) and authority functions (maintenance variable). Finally goal-orientation variables were investigated. Goal-orientation variables were conceptualized as variables relating to specific functions of environments. For the high school classroom, the academic function was chosen as a critical, but not preemptive, area. Thus, special emphasis was placed on the "academic style" in the classroom (p. 94-95).

Further, Trickett & Moos utilize published descriptions, interview data and observational data in developing the items used in their initial scale. After an extensive analysis of three previous forms of the scale, the 90-item form of the Classroom Environment Scale was developed.

Criteria for selection of the final items and subscales included:

- a) a high correlation of items with their subscale;
- b) items differentiated significantly among classrooms;
- c) items were not characteristics of only extreme classrooms (Trickett & Moos, 1974).

The nine subscales for the CES are presented in Table 1, with their brief descriptions.

Table 1

Brief CES Subscale Descriptions

<u>Relationship Dimensions</u>	
1. Involvement	measures the extent to which students have attentive interest in class activities and participate in discussions. The extent to which students do additional work on their own and enjoy the class is considered.
2. Affiliation	assesses the level of friendship students feel for each other, i.e. the extent to which they help each other with homework, get to know each other easily, and enjoy working together.
3. Teacher Support	measures the amount of help, concern, and friendship the teacher directs towards the students. The extent to which the teacher talks openly with students, trusts them, and is interested in their ideas is considered.
<u>Personal Development Dimension</u>	
4. Task Orientation	measures the extent to which it is important to complete the activities that have been planned. The emphasis the teacher places on staying on the subject matter is assessed.
5. Competition	assesses the emphasis placed on students' competing with each other for grades and recognition. An assessment of the difficulty of achieving good grades is included.
<u>System Maintenance Dimensions</u>	
6. Order and Organization	assesses the emphasis on students' behaving in an orderly and polite manner and on the overall organization of assignments and classroom activities. The degree to which students tend to remain calm and quiet is considered.
7. Rule Clarity	assesses the emphasis on establishing and following a clear set of rules, and on students knowing what the consequences will be if they do not follow them. An important focus of this subscale is the extent to which the teacher is consistent in dealing with students who break rules.
8. Teacher Control	measures how strict the teacher is in enforcing the rules, and the severity of the punishment

Table 1 (continued)

for rule infractions. The number of rules and the ease of students getting in trouble is considered.

System Change Dimension

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 9. Innovation | measures how much students contribute to planning classroom activities, and the amount of unusual and varying activities and assignments planned by the teacher. The extent to which the teacher attempts to use new techniques and encourages creative thinking in the students is considered. |
|---------------|---|

The CES is easily administered and scored, taking approximately 20 minutes to complete. Norms from a number of studies are provided and profiles of each student or group may be obtained as well as a total score.

Moos (1974) outlines a number of uses for social climate scales, including the CES. The instrument is not only useful in describing the social climate of a particular classroom, but can also be used to compare perceptions of different groups of participants (e.g., student perceptions versus teacher perceptions; "integrated students" versus "isolates").

When the data from the Real Form of the CES is compared with the Ideal Form of the CES, information can be obtained about both the degree of discrepancy between the values (Ideal Form) of the participants and the perceived Real environment, and the areas in which these discrepancies occur. This could be useful in pinpointing areas of dissatisfaction and further could be utilized in mental health consultation. Here again, comparisons can be made between groups on the Ideal Form, e.g., in what areas are students' and teachers' goals basically similar?

At present, however, the scale has been used primarily to compare and contrast different environments and to relate these differences to selected 'personality' measures. Trickett & Moos (1974b), for example, compared

different profiles to student satisfaction and moods. Similarly, Hearn & Moos (1976) found differences in climate in classrooms related to particular subject matter taught in those classrooms.

Classrooms

Why study the classroom? The classroom represents an important part of a child's daily activities and as such bears investigation. Particularly during adolescence when the family recedes in its influence, and the peer group gains influence, the classroom represents one major situation where both adult and peer values and interactions are in continuous interplay. As Trickett & Moos (1973) point out, the classroom represents the "critical locus for student interpersonal and educational development" (p. 94).

Although the adolescent usually does not spend a full day in the same classroom as do elementary school children, a single classroom may represent a sample of how he/she handles some everyday situations, such as interaction with peers and with authority adults. Certainly no claim is made that behavior in a single classroom represents an accurate picture of all school behavior, or even how an adolescent feels about school (Trickett & Moos, 1974); nevertheless, the classroom may represent an important segment of an individual's behavior, feelings, and an important climate to which he/she must in some way adapt. Of particular importance during adolescence is the social aspect of school and the classroom. Not only does the child interact in a structured setting with peers, but he/she is also in ongoing interaction with a non-parental adult. Further, the setting and its structure ensure that the contact will be ongoing. Often the youth has little or no choice about whom he/she is in the situation with--the student does not "choose" his/her classmates as he/she might his/her friends. Thus, the classroom is

likely to contain both those that the youth likes, respects, or knows, as well as those about whom he/she has negative feelings. How the youth views this environment, how he/she feels about it, and how he/she adjusts to it may have interesting if not important consequences for his/her future adjustment.

The school and the classroom, by nature of their being educational settings, are evaluative (Jackson, 1968). Not only are students evaluated formally by teachers and other school personnel, they are also evaluated by their peers, although not necessarily along the same dimensions, as Coleman (1961) noted.

As Hurlock (1974) points out, a great deal of self-evaluation occurs as the result of a child's lengthy involvement in the schools. Although this process does not begin at adolescence, the emergence of youth's identity at this stage of development (Erikson, 1968) suggests that self-evaluation contexts are of utmost importance. The emotional climate of school and, in turn, the classroom have marked influence on students' emotional states, and, thus, on their personalities (Hurlock, 1974).

Furthermore, from a mental health perspective, understanding the classroom and school culture makes good sense, for to work with adolescents it is essential to understand aspects of the culture and context within which they operate (Trickett & Todd, 1972).

Teacher Characteristics. The published research on classrooms has examined a number of different components. The teacher, for example, has long been viewed as a very important determinant of classroom behavior and climate (Hurlock, 1974). Therefore, a number of investigators have focused on teacher characteristics in relationship to what goes on in the classroom. Hartlage & Schlagel (1974), for example, related teacher "personality" characteristics with teacher-rated classroom behavior of

elementary school children. High affiliation, abasement, and nurturance needs in teachers (as measured by the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule) were found to be negatively related to desirable classroom behaviors. Another study, by Schmuck (1966) found certain characteristics of teachers related to a positive social climate in the classroom. Thus, teachers with a positive social climate tended to use psychological terms more, innovative teaching techniques, and were more sophisticated with respect to psychology and mental health concepts. Positive social climate was defined in terms of the degree of cohesiveness and shared group norms. Such studies are fairly typical of the research which has attempted to relate teacher characteristics with classroom or group characteristics.

The Teacher-Student Relationship. The nature of the teacher-student relationship has also been recognized as important to the understanding of the classroom. As Hurlock (1974) points out, the relationship of the student and teacher is in part determined by the teacher's attitude toward the student and by the student's attitude toward the teacher. And, of course, these attitudes depend on how they perceive each other. A study by Jackson (1968) found that teachers were able to predict students' attitudes with greater than chance accuracy; and, interestingly enough, the teacher seemed to be able to identify "satisfied" students more accurately than "dissatisfied" students. Moreover, the socio-metric "liking" structure seems to have an impact on how the teacher is perceived by students. Schmuck (1966) found that classrooms which had a diffuse sociometric structure perceived the teacher as understanding them more than classrooms with a central sociometric structure. Unfortunately, as Glidewell et. al. (1966) point out, almost none of the typical sociometric studies include the teacher as a subject. Usually the teacher-student relationship is perceived as something quite separate

from other social relationships within the classroom. Further, the exact nature and degree of influence the teacher-pupil relationship has over the class is, at this point, unknown (Trickett, Kelly & Todd, 1970). Certainly his/her role in the culture of the classroom bears further investigation.

Peer Relationships. Getzel & Thelen (1960) suggest that the classroom "culture" or "climate" represents a dimension of the classroom as a social system which develops through the working out of a balance between the institution and the individual. Often, as Todd (1971) notes, the peer groupings are "subcultures" which represent varied adaptations to the formal social structure of the school.

One of the most common methods for studying peer relationships in the classroom has involved sociometric studies. Usually these studies involve a technique in which class members (the students) nominate their peers as "most liked" or "most disliked." The sociometric structure is then related to dependent measures such as satisfaction, cohesiveness, etc..

In one sociometric study, Schmuck (1966) related sociometric structures on dimensions of "liking" and "influence" to the classroom social climate. He found three separate types of sociometric structure:

1. Diffuse sociometric structure, involving wide dispersion of both popularity and non-support.
2. Bimodal sociometric structure, involving a narrow focus of positivity and negativity. That is, there was large agreement over who was liked most and who were liked least, with a number of students mentioned by no one.
3. Monomodal centrality (mixed type), involving positive choices focused on only a few and negative choices diffuse, or positive choices diffuse and negative choices focused on only a few.

Schmuck's results indicate that diffuse sociometric structures were generally positively related to a positive social climate. Where there was a concentration of liked and disliked members, for example, cohesiveness was generally low. Diffuseness of structure was determined to be positively

related to attitudes toward school, the perception that the teacher understands them, and that school work was "fun," in addition to the positive relationship to cohesiveness. Although other studies (Glidewell, et. al., 1966; Glidewell, 1971) have indicated that centrality of structure improves the accuracy of class members' perception of the status of themselves and others in the classroom, this is generally related to a negative social climate within the classroom.

The type of sociometric pattern which emerges in any group seems to vary according to the specific task demanded of the raters. Individuals in a group may be judged or nominated on a number of different social dimensions such as liking, compatability, or social influence, to name a few. Glidewell et. al. (1966) review literature which suggests that differences emerge in the structure, depending upon whether one is measuring emotional acceptance, competence, or social power. Although estimated correlations between these three dimensions range from .30 between perceived competence and social power and .60 between emotional acceptance and social power, these dimensions all appear to be measuring something somewhat different.

There is also some question as to what a particular dimension of sociometric structure is measuring. If, for example, a child is asked to nominate the most liked and least liked members of his/her class, he/she could respond in at least two very different ways. First, the child could nominate others based on whether those nominated are best liked and least liked by others--a measure of cultural popularity. Second, he/she could respond in a very personal way, nominating those that he/she likes least and best. To this author's knowledge clarification of what a subject is doing when he/she makes judgments has never been made in any of the sociometric literature. Furthermore, this author would

contend that the meaning of the sociometric patterns could be quite different depending upon how the task is interpreted, particularly for those who do not share the common viewpoint.

Undoubtedly, however, sociometric ratings can reveal which individuals are integrated into the culture of the classroom and which are not, and this information in itself can be usefully related to other variables. Glidewell (1971), for example, found sociometric isolation associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, poor interpersonal skills, and emotional handicaps. However, he notes that a number of different "types" of children may exist in the classroom, and that these distinctions may not appear in the sociometric ratings. Perhaps most easily recognized is the popular individual or group, one who is nominated frequently and seems to be well integrated into the social system (culture) within the classroom. Next is the contraculture--individuals who oppose the "approved" culture, and, thus, may appear isolated within sociometric ratings. Todd (1971) calls his similar distinction of youth, "the citizens and the tribe." Whether or not the Tribe would appear as isolates on sociometric ratings might depend largely upon the relative number of members of each "group" within the classroom. Next, Glidewell discusses what he calls the "Invisible Child." These individuals are those who are simply not noticed; they are unaware of social expectations of them, are unaware of the social structure of the classroom and their position in it, do not seem to be in distress, and seem to have no need to be noticed. Although Glidewell (1971) suggests that these are not like the isolates, this author would suggest that they are what could be called "true isolates." Those children who are generally regarded as isolates appear to be those who are not well liked; they are actively excluded from the ongoing culture of the classroom, and do not seem to have a subgroup or contraculture.

Clearly, a number of different patterns of interaction can emerge within the classroom; a number of groups and subgroups may be in existence; commonly used sociometric techniques, however, appear to be rather ineffective in teasing out subtle differences.

Problems within the classroom. As Trickett & Todd (1972) point out, when problems occur within a classroom, the first instinct of school personnel and others is to see the problem as residing within the child. However, as these authors note, "The more a behavior is limited to a particular setting, the less appropriate it is to attribute the actions to pervasive personality traits" (p. 30). Trickett, Kelly, and Todd (1972) suggest that

One possible way of organizing a view of the individual and making the interactive or relational features of his behavior especially explicit is to consider the relevance of various behaviors and attributes to his modes of coping with the environment (p. 368).

The importance of the classroom context for its participants has been mentioned previously. The school and classroom context is one in which the individual frequently evaluates him/herself with respect to others. Thus, it does not seem to be a leap in logic to infer that problems within the classroom may in fact be a function of the context and its personal impact on students and teachers. Hurlock (1974) suggests that school dropouts often occur for "social reasons," that is, when the individual is not accepted by his classmates. Sociometric studies in general (Lippett & Gold, 1959; Epperson, 1963; Schmuck, 1966) rather consistently find that those individuals who are excluded from the classroom structure demonstrate a number of problems within the classroom such as alienation, low self-esteem, anxiety, nervousness, as well as engaging in disruptive behavior within the classroom.

The relationship of the classroom climate to satisfaction within

the classroom has received increasing attention recently. Trickett & Moos (1974b) related satisfaction and mood to the perceived classroom climate as measured by the CES. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with the class and teacher, and their mood (How happy, angry, anxious, secure, interested do you generally feel in this class?) to dimensions of the climate scale. The results of their study indicated a significant relationship between satisfaction with the teacher and the subscales of Teacher Support, Innovation, and Student Involvement. Satisfaction with the class tended to be related to Clarity of Rules; satisfaction with fellow classmates tended to be related to high Student Affiliation. With respect to moods within the classroom, Trickett & Moos found that students were angrier in classes which were low in Order and Organization. Security was positively related to Teacher Support and Student Involvement. Interest was found to be related to high Involvement, Teacher Support, and Rule Clarity. Once again, however, it is important to note that the dimensions of the CES represent Trickett & Moos' inferences as to what is being measured by particular items.

Generally, little research has been done specifically relating the classroom's social context to the problems within the classroom. The present study will explore this area by examining the relationship of the social context to the problems within the classroom as they are perceived by its members, students and teacher alike. Although no real effort will be made to compare classrooms with each other on this variable, certainly this represents an area for future research.

The Notion of "Fit"

The notion of fit between individuals or between an individual and a social system is one which this author finds particularly useful for understanding problems which occur in particular contexts with particular