

Social Maladjustment: An Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The exclusionary term social maladjustment in the definition of serious emotional disturbance, used for Public Law 94-142, has been an enigma for special education. This article is an attempt to make a reasonable and limited interpretation of social maladjustment. It is important that the interpretation of this term be limited because there is a growing effort to interpret social maladjustment in a very broad way to include all disorders of social behavior. The recent Honig v. Doe (1988) decision appears to be adding impetus to this effort. Exclusion of students with antisocial behavior problems from special education apparently appears to some to be a readily available way of retaining the power of expulsion over students with antisocial behavior. This article argues that such an interpretation is not appropriate and is not consistent with the intent of the serious emotional disturbance definition. In making this argument, the article also addresses some additional issues related to the current label and definition and briefly discusses identification and programing.

With the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, serious emotional disturbance (SED) was established as a special education category within that law. The definition adopted for implementing PL 94-142 provided for the exclusion of the "socially maladjusted" from special education services. Since its adoption, this undefined exclusion has been an enigma for special education. The puzzle posed by this ambiguous exclusion is evident in the fact that over half of the states have simply ignored it in their state definitions (Mack, 1985).

This writer believes that it is important for social maladjustment (SMA) to be defined. Until it is defined, it serves as a convenient loophole for those who choose to define it very broadly for various administrative purposes. There has been an ongoing effort to equate this term with any disorder of social behavior (Clarizio, 1987; Kelly, 1986; Slenkovich, 1983). In a recent survey (Center & Eden, in press) of state directors of special education, 53% selected this broad interpretation (from three choices) of social maladjustment as being closest in meaning to their understanding of the term. With the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Honig v. Doe* (1988) prohibiting the expulsion of handicapped students, this writer has observed a growing interest in the broad interpretation of social maladjustment referred to above. This increase in interest appears to be motivated by a desire, on the part of some, to ensure that expulsion will continue to be a readily available option for disciplining students exhibiting antisocial behavior.

It can and has been argued that the exclusion should be removed from the definition (CCBD, 1987). However, as long as it is part of the definition, it needs to be defined. An overly broad interpretation of the exclusion represents a serious risk for abuse of the exclusion. This writer believes the broad interpretation described above has and will continue to result in abuse of the exclusion. Establishing an alternative interpretation is one approach to trying to limit abuse of the exclusion. The balance of this article will be an attempt to argue for an alternative and limited interpretation of the *socially maladjusted* exclusion.

While deliberating on how to best interpret the meaning of social maladjustment, it became clear that it would be helpful to clarify several other issues. The other issues that need to be addressed include the label and the nature of the definition currently being used in PL 94-142 and its regulations. Both the label and definition can lead to different conceptualizations of what constitutes a disorder depending upon how one understands and uses them. Therefore, anyone wishing to interpret the exclusion should, in this writer's opinion, make his or her understanding and use of both the label and definition.

Label

There is a great deal of confusion about labels used to identify students with behavior problems and the meaning of these labels. PL 94-142 uses the label *seriously emotionally disturbed* (SED) while many professionals in the field use the label *behaviorally disordered* (BD). In addition to the use of these two different labels, each label can be used in one or two ways. Each label can be used *inclusively* or *exclusively*. When either label is used *inclusively*, it is intended to subsume a wide range of disorders including those in the affective, cognitive, functional, and social domains (Anthony, 1970). When *seriously emotionally disturbed* is used *exclusively*, the intent is to restrict its referent to the affective domain. When *behaviorally disordered* is used *exclusively*, the intent is to restrict its referent to the social domain.

Anthony's taxonomy of behavioral disorders (see Table 1) can be used to illustrate the different connotations that the labels have come to have for different users. *Seriously emotionally disturbed* and *behaviorally disordered* when used *inclusively* encompass the major behavior classes represented by the affective, cognitive, functional, and social domains and their respective subclasses. When either are used *exclusively*, the speaker intends to restrict the meaning of the terms to the affective domain and its subclasses on the one hand and to the social domain and its subclasses on the other. These varying uses and connotations are partially illustrated by Slenkovich (1983) and her adherents who use *seriously emotionally disturbed* and *behaviorally disordered* both in their *exclusive* sense — that is, emotional (affective domain) disorders qualify for special education but behavioral (social domain) disorders do not qualify for special education (Center, 1985). In contrast, The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders appears to use both labels in their *inclusive* sense — that is, any disorder of behavior, regardless of domain, that results in an educational handicap qualifies for special education.

TABLE 1

An Illustration of the Major Classes and Subclasses of Behavior That May Be Disordered in Children and Youth (with Examples)

Behavioral Disorders (used inclusively)			
I. Behavior Classes:			
1. <i>Affective</i>	2. <i>Cognitive</i>	3. <i>Functional</i>	4. <i>Social</i>
II. Subclasses:			
a. Anxiety	a. Thinking	a. Eating	a. Attacking
b. Depression	b. Orienting	b. Eliminating	b. Oppositional
c. Fear	c. Reality-testing	c. Movement	c. Sexual
III. Examples of Behavior:			
1. Panic	1. Magical thinking	1. Rumination	1. Fighting
2. Sadness	2. Identity confusion	2. Diarrhea	2. Negativism
3. Cowardice	3. Failure to anticipate consequences	3. Incoordination	3. Promiscuity

This table is based on Anthony's (1970) taxonomy of childhood behavior disorders.

The position taken in this article is that the most appropriate label is *behaviorally disordered* used *inclusively*. While there are many good reasons for preferring the *behaviorally disordered* label (Feldman, Kinnison, Jay, & Harth, 1983; Huntze, 1985), only one will be discussed. The label *emotionally disturbed* is essentially a medical term with a particular theoretical bias — that is, psychodynamic psychiatry. This writer (Center, 1986, 1989a) agrees with Albee (1968) that the appropriate model for dealing with most problems of children and youth, as well as adults, is an educational model. Special education is not a

medical specialty but an educational specialty. It therefore should, if for no other reason, use an intervention model and associated terminology that is appropriate to an educational specialty (Center, 1986, 1989a). For example, the field of learning disabilities has dropped its earlier use of a medical label *brain-damaged* and its implications in favor of a purely descriptive label *learning disability*. We also should drop our use of what is essentially a medical term *emotionally disturbed* and its implications in favor of a more descriptive label and one without a theoretical bias. The most widely used and suitable label available for adoption appears to be the label *behaviorally disordered* (Huntze, 1985).

Definition

There has been a national discussion going on for several years about the definition of *serious emotional disturbance* used by PL 94-142. This discussion has primarily revolved around whether or not the definition is an inclusive definition of the term *serious emotional disturbance* or whether it is an exclusive definition of the term (Center, 1985; CCB, 1987). The definition of *serious emotional disturbance* begins with the words "The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics." Following these words there is a statement of three conditions that must be met and five characteristics, one or more of which must be met. The debate over this definition essentially revolves around the interpretation of the words a *condition*. Those who argue that it is an inclusive definition interpret those words to mean *any condition* that meets the criteria provided. Those who argue that it is an exclusive definition interpret those words to mean *an emotional condition* that meets the criteria provided.

The position taken in this article is that the *serious emotional disturbance* used for PL 94-142 was intended to be an inclusive definition, not an exclusive definition restricted to disorders in the affective domain. The following are this writer's reasons for the position:

1. The very fact that the definition has the social maladjustment exclusion in it supports the contention that the definition was intended as an inclusive definition. If the definition had been intended as an exclusive definition, there would have been no reason to place an exclusion in it. Only an inclusive definition, in which a specific exception is desired, would require an exclusion.
2. The statement of the definition itself suggests an inclusive intent by the very fact that the wording used was a *condition* rather than the more specific wording *an emotional condition* that could have been used, if the intent had been exclusive.
3. Eli Bower, who wrote the definition, has made it quite clear that his definition was intended to be an inclusive definition and not an exclusive definition (Bower, 1982). Bower argues that attempts to exclude disorders of social behavior under his definition are a corruption of that definition. He states that the social maladjustment exclusion is meaningless since he defined emotional disturbance in terms of children's social maladjustments. Bower further argues that the social and emotional domains are complementary and that they cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive domains on any rational basis.
4. The medical use of the term *emotional disturbance* with its psychodynamic bias makes the very claim that Bower, among others, argues is not possible — that is, disorders can have a purely emotional basis and that such disorders can be cleanly discriminated from other types of disorders. The lack of validity for this diagnostic claim is well documented (Mischel, 1968). In any event, this medical view of disturbance is certainly not the only view, not demonstrably the most accurate view, nor necessarily the most appropriate view upon which to base educational decisions.
5. Any reasonable analysis of the criteria in the definition will also support the contention that the definition was not intended to exclude all disorders in the social domain.
 - a. The third condition in the definition states that serious emotional disturbance is a condition "which adversely affects educational performance." Research shows that as the number of social behavior problems increase, achievement decreases (Bower, 1981; Kazdin, 1987; Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1987 — cited in Kauffman, 1989).
 - b. Characteristic (B) specifies "An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships." Interpersonal clearly implies social, and one of the primary reasons for such an inability would be a lack of social competence (Phillips, 1978).

c. Characteristic (C) specifies "Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings." Inappropriate behavior clearly includes behavior related to the social domain. Had the intent been to limit this characteristic to the affective domain, the appropriate wording would have been "Inappropriate types of behavior *and* feelings." Further, had the intent been to limit inappropriate behavior to inappropriate affective behavior, the regulation discussed below would not have been written as broadly as it is.

6. The federal regulations governing implementation of PL 94-142 include the following statement:

Where a handicapped child is so disruptive in a regular classroom that the education of other students is significantly impaired, the needs of the handicapped child cannot be met in that environment. Therefore, regular placement would not be appropriate for his or her needs. (34 CFR *300.552, p. 51)

It seems clear from the wording of this regulation that the intent of the definition was to include all types of disruptive behavior, not just disruptive behavior related to the affective domain. Furthermore, this regulation suggests that it is possible to interpret the condition "adversely affects educational performance" in the definition to mean the student's behavior adversely affects his or her educational performance and/or that of classmates. Given this possibility, it doesn't make much sense to contend that the definition is only concerned with disturbing affective behavior but not social behavior.

7. Follow-up research (Robins, 1966, 1974, 1979) clearly shows that among children with nonpsychotic behavioral disorders, those with inadequate socialization and serious anti-social behavior are at greatest risk for mental health problems in adulthood. Given this, it should be clear that they are also the children in greatest need for early intervention — that is, during their school years. It is difficult to believe that PL 94-142 would have sought to specifically exclude the students who have been shown to be in greatest need of services both because of their achievement problems (see 5a above) and risk for developing adult mental health problems.

It would seem evident to this writer that the label and definition used by PL 94-142 were intended in their inclusive sense without regard to the domain (affective, cognitive, functional, or social) to which behavior can be related. Affective, cognitive, functional, or social behavior development can be faulty. Development gone awry in any of the four domains or, more likely, some combination of them may result in behaviors that constitute a significant impediment to education, that is, an educational handicap. Since PL 94-142 is a piece of educational legislation, there is little doubt that its primary intent is to address the needs of students who are educationally handicapped. In the case of the *serious emotional disturbance* definition, the central issue is not what is the student's medical (psychiatric) diagnosis but rather, is the student educationally handicapped by his or her behavior.

Social Maladjustment

The context for a discussion of an interpretation of social maladjustment has now been established. There are basically four different positions on the meaning of social maladjustment. First, there is Bower's (1982) position. Bower indicates that he defined emotional disturbance in terms of children's social maladjustments and that both are related aspects of the same condition. Second, there is the position taken in DSM II (APA, 1968) which was the APA classification manual in use at the time the definition was adopted. DSM II defined social maladjustment in terms of cultural conflict. In this view, social maladjustment is an adjustment disorder resulting from problems in trying to adapt to an alien culture or from having divided loyalties to two different cultures (Freedman, Kaplan, & Sadock, 1976). Third, there is the position taken by Quay (1987) on social maladjustment, often referred to as socialized delinquency or subcultural delinquency, which is defined as socialized aggression that represents an "adjustive response to environmental circumstances." Fourth, there is the position taken by Clarizio (1987), Kelly (1986), and Slenkovich (1983). In this view, social maladjustment is defined as any disorder in which antisocial behavior is a central feature.

This fourth position broadly uses the label *conduct disorder* to define the population that it would have us consider as socially maladjusted. The use of the label *conduct disorder* in

this position follows the usage found in DSM III-R by the American Psychiatric Association (1987). Conduct disorder as defined by DSM III-R is a broad category that subsumes several subtypes of behavioral disorders involving social behavior.

There is, however, another use of the label *conduct disorder* that involves a clear categorical distinction in disorders of social behavior. Quay (1986) has developed a classification system and an assessment instrument that uses the label *conduct disorder* to refer to unsocialized aggressive and nonaggressive behavior and the label *socialized aggression* to refer to one type of delinquent-like behavior. That this distinction can be empirically made is further supported by the research of Achenbach (1985). Achenbach's classification system and assessment instrument employ the labels *aggressive* and *delinquent* to make this distinction. The DSM III-R conduct disorder category also makes distinctions similar to the ones just discussed but does so by labeling them as solitary and group subtypes of conduct disorder.

The definition of serious emotional disturbance excludes the socially maladjusted from special education services unless the student is also emotionally handicapped, for educational purposes, according to the conditions and criteria provided in the definition. What the definition fails to do is make it clear to whom it is referring when it excludes those who are only socially maladjusted. The exclusion of the socially maladjusted in the serious emotional disturbance definition used by PL 94-142 clearly suggests that the intent is to exclude some type of disorder of social behavior. For reasons already discussed at length above, it seems apparent that the intent was not to exclude all disorders of social behavior. What then is the most appropriate interpretation of the exclusion?

Bower's position is rejected, for interpretive purposes, on the grounds that it is a moot point since the exclusion exists and is having an impact on the lives of children and youth every day. Bower may very well be correct in rejecting the distinction between serious emotional disturbance and social maladjustment as meaningless. If his contention is correct, then an effort needs to be mounted to get the exclusion removed from the regulations. A case could be made for the DSM II definition of social maladjustment. However, it seems somewhat unlikely that there would have been sufficient concern with this largely transitory disorder to warrant specifically excluding it. The position taken by Slenkovich, Kelly, and Clarizio is rejected because it attempts to exclude all disorders of social behavior. For reasons that have already been discussed, it seems unlikely that such a broad exclusion of social behavior problems was intended.

The position taken in this article is that the appropriate interpretation of the term *social maladjustment* in the serious emotional disturbance definition is one consistent with the third position discussed above, that is, Quay's socialized aggressive (subcultural delinquent) group. In terms of DSM III-R categories, this would include *only* the "group type" of conduct disorder, (formerly, the socialized aggressive and socialized nonaggressive subtypes in DSM III).

The reasons for equating socialized aggression with social maladjustment follow.

1. The prevalence estimate provided for serious emotional disturbance (2-3%) would support this view. A conservative estimate of the subcultural delinquent population alone would make it at least equal to the upper end of the prevalence estimate used for serious emotional disturbance. Clearly, if the subcultural delinquent population was to be included under the definition, the prevalence estimate for serious emotional disturbance would have been greater than 2-3%.

2. Furthermore, socialized aggression is generally believed to be an adaptive response to environmental circumstances that leads to support and acceptance from a specific subculture. Such adaptive responses are not generally viewed as evidence of a psychological disorder even when they result in behavior that is considered deviant by the mainstream culture. In short, the behavior may be deviant and even criminal but is not pathological.

3. Public schools have little likelihood, as presently structured, of providing an effective intervention in problems arising from the broad context of a student's social ecology. As Quay (1987) has argued, effective intervention for socialized aggression "should be focused on systemic variables" such as the peer group, family, and community.

4. On the other hand, in our culture public schools are second only to the family as

agents of socialization. It is reasonable to expect that schools may be able to develop effective interventions for unsocialized aggressive students whose problems are largely attributable to inadequate socialization.

Both unsocialized and socialized aggressive students are potentially educationally handicapped by their behavior. There is little doubt that many students in the socialized aggressive category need specialized educational services both because of their achievement deficits and because of the negative impact of their behavior on regular classroom programs (Nelson & Rutherford, 1990).

Identification

Assessment to determine eligibility for special education services for behavioral disorders is often conceptualized by school psychologists in terms of the American Psychiatric Association's (1987) DSM III-R diagnostic and classification system. While the popularity of this diagnostic model is unlikely to change, it must be borne in mind that DSM III-R is a medical model and not an educational model. As a medical tool it was not designed for nor intended for making educational decisions. Therefore, the fit between this medical tool and the needs of education will not necessarily be a good one. Its use for conceptualizing educational problems must make due allowances for the differences in psychiatric and educational problems.

The critical issue in a diagnosis of behavioral disorder (emotional disturbance) as an educational handicap is not some hypothetical disturbance of affect but rather the impact of the student's problem on educational performance. It is irrelevant whether or not the student has excesses of behavior (e.g., anxiety or aggression) or deficits of behavior (e.g., guilt or social skills). The central question is, does the student's behavior significantly and adversely affect his or her educational performance or that of classmates?

It must also be remembered that the exclusion of the socially maladjusted applies *only* when there is no evidence of other problems that would qualify the student for special education services. It is not sufficient to simply determine that the student is socially maladjusted and exclude the student from service on those grounds without further evaluation for a qualifying condition.

A diagnosis of social maladjustment should be based on a complete psychological assessment including a social history that supports the diagnosis (Center, 1989b). As a part of that assessment, instruments should be included that will be useful for identifying the socially maladjusted (Center, 1989b). Examples of such instruments are the *Behavior Problem Checklist — Revised* (Quay & Peterson, 1983) and the *Child Behavior Checklist* (Achenbach, 1981).

Both of these instruments cited above provide information about various types of problems including social maladjustment as defined in this article. Because these instruments give indications about possible disorders of several types, they should be particularly useful for directing the focus of the assessment. Both instruments contain separate scales for the two major types of antisocial behavior discussed in this article. Both instruments also contain scales for other types of disorders as well. These additional scales should be useful in providing indications about whether a student who appears to be socially maladjusted needs to be assessed for the presence of another condition that may qualify him or her for special education.

Programing

There clearly exists the possibility that some students who are socially maladjusted, as defined above, may also qualify for special education services. This would occur when such a student, in addition to being socially maladjusted, meets the conditions and criteria in the serious emotional disturbance definition for being considered to have an emotional handicap for educational purposes.

When planning services for students who are socially maladjusted several things need to be taken into consideration. First, these students' behavior is a product of socialization even though we may view it as an inappropriate socialization. A major factor in that socialization

will probably be the peer group (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978). Therefore, mixing these students with undersocialized students is not recommended. In fact, such mixing may be counterproductive because of the potency of the socialized aggressive as peer models for inappropriate socialization (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Second, research has failed to demonstrate that any of several possible approaches to intervention with the socialized aggressive population has been particularly successful (Gordon & Arbuthnot, 1987). These authors' review of the research literature suggests that, in the short term, educational approaches with an emphasis on developing specific skills and abilities are effective. Unfortunately, the long-term effects of all types of interventions have been meager.

In view of the research findings, intervention efforts in educational settings probably should focus on resocialization with an emphasis on mainstream values and the development of social competence including both its behavioral and cognitive aspects (Center, 1989a, 1989b) based upon these values. Finally, effort needs to be directed at involvement in the program to as great an extent as possible of families and the community. In particular, there should be an attempt to interface with community agencies serving families and children including juvenile authorities and programs.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the inclusive use of the *behaviorally disordered* label is recommended for educational handicaps in the affective, cognitive, functional, and social domains of behavior. Second, it is recommended that the *serious emotional disturbance* definition adopted for implementing PL 94-142 be viewed as an inclusive definition that means "any condition" that meets the criteria provided, unless that condition is specifically excluded. Third, it is recommended that *social maladjustment* for special education purposes be interpreted to mean socialized aggression (socialized delinquency) but not unsocialized aggression following the distinction made between these two categories by both Quay and Achenbach. Finally, in order to reduce terminological confusion, it is further recommended that when the DSM III-R label *conduct disorder* is used to refer to social maladjustment, group type be specified.

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