

Teacher Perceptions of Social Behavior in Behaviorally Disordered and Socially Normal Children and Youth

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that teacher perception of the behavior of students affects the interaction between teacher and student. This study attempted to determine if teachers perceive a difference between behaviorally disordered and socially normal students in terms of interpersonal behavior. A total of 410 subjects between the ages of 8 and 15 classified as either behaviorally disordered or socially normal were assessed using the Social Performance Survey Schedule. Data analysis included the MANOVA and oneway analysis of variance. The results indicated that socially normal subjects were perceived as having significantly more prosocial behavior and significantly less antisocial behavior than behaviorally disordered subjects. Further, female subjects were perceived as having significantly more prosocial behavior and less antisocial behavior than males. The teachers perceived significant improvement in prosocial behavior with increasing age. Teachers also perceived a significant increase in negative social behavior for normal secondary-age students but not for behaviorally disordered students. Behaviorally disordered students, however, continued to be perceived as significantly worse at both age levels. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Teacher perception of students is an important variable influencing the way teachers respond to students. For example, Brophy and Good (1970) found that teacher expectations influenced the number and types of questions asked students, the type of feedback given to student answers to questions, and the number and type of teacher initiated interactions with students. These observed effects are probably due, in part, to teachers' perception of the teachability of their students (Kornblau & Keogh, 1980).

When a teacher perceives a student's behavior as inappropriate, it would be expected that the teacher's opinion of the student's teachability will decline. No doubt this will affect the nature of student/teacher interaction. These same attitudes can also affect the success of mainstreaming efforts (Kornblau & Keogh, 1980). Finally, teacher perceptions can impact on referrals and placement decisions as has been shown by Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Rinchey, & Graden (1981). In fact, these authors suggest that opinion about a student may be more influential than objective information in making a judgment about whether or not a student is handicapped.

This study examined teacher perception of social behavior in behaviorally disordered and social normal children and youth. As used here, social behavior includes both antisocial or negative social behavior and prosocial or positive social behavior. Antisocial behavior has been widely documented as a major factor in behavioral disorders (Epstein, Kauffman, & Cullinan, 1985; Patterson, 1976; Quay, 1979). Lack of age appropriate prosocial behavior has also been recognized as an important factor in behavioral disorders (Goldstein, Apter, & Harootunian, 1984; Kohn, 1977; Phillips, 1978).

The study attempted to address three questions. One, are there differences in teachers' perceptions of prosocial behavior and antisocial behavior among behaviorally disordered and socially normal students? Two, will the teachers' perceptions of social behavior in male

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and female children and youth be different? Three, will the teachers' perceptions of social behavior in younger and older students be different?

METHOD

Subjects

Behaviorally disordered students came from the population of students classified as emotionally conflicted according to criteria used by the state of Alabama Department of Education (Teague, Baker, & McLaney, 1980). The Alabama regulations employ a definition of emotional conflict that is identical to the definition used by the Office of Special Education and Related Services in the United States Department of Education for serious emotional disturbance. Evaluation of a student referred for services in an emotionally conflicted program must be done by a state department approved psychological examiner, a licensed psychologist, or a licensed psychiatrist. The evaluation must include: vision and hearing screening, individual intellectual assessment, a behavior rating scale completed by at least three persons who have had contact with the student for at least 6 weeks, and an individual educational achievement assessment. The behavior rating scale used in the evaluation is left to the discretion of the examiner as is any additional assessment of socioemotional functioning. Socially normal students were selected using the following criteria: the student had to be in a regular education program, had not been identified as a special education student, nor referred for possible placement in special education.

Data were collected on a total of 410 subjects. The first data obtained were on 205 behaviorally disordered (BD) subjects. Following the data collection for the BD subjects, data were obtained on 205 socially normal (SN) subjects. Both groups were approximately 25% female and 75% male. The subjects ranged in age from 8 to 15 years with approximately one half of the subjects in the 8- to 11-year age range and the other half in the 12- to 15-year age range. The subjects were 30% black and 70% white. The proportions of black to white in each study group were approximately the same. There was some overlap in districts providing data on BD and SN subjects. Some of the data on BD and SN subjects were obtained from the Mobile and Huntsville (Alabama) school districts. Both of these districts are predominantly urban and are two of the larger school systems in Alabama.

Measurement

A modification of the *Social Performance Survey Schedule* (SPSS) developed by Cautela and Lowe (1976) was used to assess interpersonal social behavior. The SPSS is a self-report rating scale using 100 items of social behavior divided evenly between positive and negative behaviors. The positive and negative items are intermingled to avoid response set. The modifications made in the SPSS included using it as an informant scored rating scale instead of as a self-report scale, which required some minor changes in wording, and having each item scored on a 5-point (1-5) Likert-type scale with the bipolar extremes represented by the terms "almost always" and "almost never". The SPSS is based on a definition of social skill used by Libet and Lewinsohn (1973).

When used as a self-report instrument, Lowe and Cautela (1978) reported that the SPSS had an internal consistency of .94 and test-retest reliability (over 4 weeks) of .87 overall, with .88 and .85 for the positive and negative scales, respectively.

New reliability data were obtained on the modified SPSS as a part of this study. A coefficient of equivalence (Cronbach, 1960) was computed using randomly formed half-tests. The split-half reliability was .91. Test-retest reliability, using a 4-week interval, was .89 overall with .89 and .86 for the positive and negative scales, respectively. Both the original reliability data and the reliability data obtained as part of this study indicate that the SPSS has good internal consistency and stability over time.

Validity was established by correlating scores on the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (Watson & Friend, 1969) with the SPSS. The SAD is a measure of experienced anxiety in various social situations. Significant negative correlations were obtained between the two scales. The overall correlation was -.42, with -.39 and -.27 for the positive and negative

scales, respectively. These negative correlations demonstrated an inverse relationship between social anxiety and social skill and were in the predicted direction. Recently, Miller and Funabiki (1983) attempted to establish the predictive validity of SPSS. Their results yielded strong support for the predictive validity of the SPSS in differentiating high socially competent and low socially competent subjects on both observed behaviors as well as global ratings and self-report measures.

New validity data were obtained on the modified SPSS as part of this study. A criterion-related validity study was done using the Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1967). Correlations among the SPSS scales and the subscales of the BPC were computed using 29 subjects who were rated on both the SPSS and the BPC. The correlations between the positive, negative, and total SPSS scores and the conduct disorder, personality problem, inadequacy/immaturity, and total BPC scores ranged from $r = .29$ ($p < .06$) to $r = .78$ ($p < .000$). The correlation for the total scores on the two instruments was $r = .72$ ($p < .000$). Since Guilford (1956) has argued that correlations of .30 or greater are acceptable for establishing criterion related validity, the results support a finding of acceptable criterion-related validity for the SPSS.

Procedures

Behaviorally disordered subjects were obtained by conducting a survey of directors of special education in all of the school systems in the state of Alabama to determine which systems would be willing to participate in the study. A total of 136 systems were surveyed; 40 systems, including both rural and urban areas, agreed to participate and 38 systems actually participated. In order to be included, a student had to be identified as emotionally conflicted and placed in a special education program, either full-time or part-time, for emotionally conflicted students.

Socially normal subjects were then obtained from regular classroom teachers enrolled in courses at the University of South Alabama, Mississippi State University, and teachers in the Huntsville, Alabama, Public Schools. Socially normal subjects were selected using the criteria given above.

The special education directors were asked to have the rating scale completed on each emotionally conflicted student being served within their school system who was between the ages of 8 and 15. The students' special education teacher was to be the person responsible for filling out the scale. Since special education teacher participation was obtained through supervisors, the voluntariness of the teachers' participation is unclear. At the time the rating scale was sent out, the average number of students served by each teacher of the emotionally conflicted in Alabama was 8. However, since 38 school districts participated in the study, the number of students rated by each teacher would have to average less than 8. The actual number of different teachers participating is unclear, but it would have to be at least 38. The actual number was, in all probability, larger than 38. The special education directors were asked to have their teachers of the emotionally conflicted complete the rating scale on no more than one student per day.

Regular classroom teachers rated the socially normal subjects on the SPSS. Participation by these teachers was voluntary. Since most of these teachers were enrolled in graduate courses and their participation was voluntary, they do not represent a random sample of regular classroom teachers. The regular classroom teachers were predominantly female. At the elementary level, the teacher sex ratio is estimated to have been about 6 females to 1 male and, at the secondary level, about 3 females to 1 male. No data were available on the sex ratio of the special education teachers. There was no attempt to match the special and regular teachers on such variables as age, sex, experience, or level of education.

Each regular classroom teacher was asked to fill out the rating scale on up to 5 students in his or her classroom. Approximately 40 teachers participated in providing the data on socially normal subjects. Each teacher was given certain constraints related to age, sex, and race in addition to the criteria employed for selecting socially normal students. The age, sex, and racial constraints were designed to insure that a pool of socially normal subjects would be obtained which was similar in age, sex, and racial composition to the emotionally

conflicted subjects. The teachers were asked to select students at random from those who met the criteria and constraints provided. These teachers were also asked to complete the rating scale on no more than one student per day.

All teachers were instructed to rate only students they had known for at least 60 days. They were also instructed to try to recall, for each item, a particular situation or situations in which the student demonstrated the behavior or should have demonstrated it. The special education directors in each participating school system distributed and collected the SPSS for the behaviorally disordered subjects. The investigators distributed and collected the SPSS for the socially normal subjects.

RESULTS

All of the statistical analysis in this study was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). All data on positive items from the SPSS were inverted prior to statistical analysis. This was done so that the scoring would be comparable between the positive and negative items (i.e., the lower the score, the better for both types of items).

The first statistical analysis performed on the data was a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ MANOVA, using the Wilks Test, to determine if there were any significant differences on the two levels of each of the three independent variables (category, sex, and age) and the two levels of the dependent variable (positive and negative subscales). Age was reduced to two levels by combining ages 8 to 11 for one level and ages 12 to 15 for the second level. The Wilks for the effect by category was significant ($p < .000$) and applied to both the positive subscale ($p < .000$) and the negative subscale ($p < .000$). The Wilks for the effect by sex was significant ($p < .000$) and applied to both the positive subscale ($p < .000$) and the negative subscale ($p < .002$). The Wilks for the effect by age was significant ($p < .009$). The effect was limited to the positive subscale ($p < .039$). There was one significant interaction. The Wilks for age by category was significant ($p < .001$). The interaction effect was limited to the negative subscale ($p < .005$). The mean scores on each level of the dependent variable for the three independent variables can be found in Table 1.

The MANOVA was followed by a oneway ANOVA by item to identify the individual social behavior variables contributing to the differences found by the MANOVA. This analysis was done by sex and category for both the positive and negative subscales. The BD males differed from SN males on 46 of the positive items and on 45 of the negative items. BD females differed from SN females on 40 positive items and on 38 negative items. All of the significant differences were in favor of the SN subjects. Results of the item analysis and the items on the SPSS are available upon request from Center (1986).

The first question asked in this study was, are teachers' perceptions different regarding the social behavior of the BD and SN students? The answer to this question as indicated by the results of this study appears to be yes. The results of the MANOVA found significant differences between the two groups on the social behavior variables used in this study.

The second question in this study was, will the social behavior perceived to be different vary by sex? The results of this study indicate that perceived social behavior does vary by sex. The third question in this study was, will teacher perceptions of social behavior be different for younger and older subjects? The results of this study indicate that perceptions do, in general, vary across age for prosocial behavior. The results, however, suggest some interaction between age and category.

DISCUSSION

The teachers consistently perceived significant differences in social behavior between behaviorally disordered and socially normal subjects on both the positive and negative subscales of the SPSS. The teachers saw less prosocial behavior and more antisocial behavior in the behaviorally disordered group than in the socially normal group. This finding is consistent with expectations based on research such as that by Patterson (1976) which suggest that high levels of antisocial behavior and arrested socialization seem to occur together.

TABLE 1
*A Table of Means and Number of Subjects for the Three
Independent Variables and the Two Levels of the Dependent Variable*

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Subscale		Independent Variable Level	
Category		BD		SN	
	Positive	157.00		128.88	
		(205)		(205)	
	Negative	149.28		115.61	
		(205)		(205)	
Sex		Male		Female	
	Positive	145.89		134.02	
		(308)		(102)	
	Negative	135.14		124.30	
		(308)		(102)	
Age		Elementary		Secondary	
	Positive	145.66		140.42	
		(197)		(213)	
	Negative	129.95		134.75	
		(197)		(213)	
Age by Category		BD		SN	
		Ele.	Sec.	Ele.	Sec.
	Positive	157.61	156.41	133.34	124.87
		(100)	(105)	(97)	(108)
	Negative	151.19	147.46	108.05	122.40
		(100)	(105)	(97)	(108)

NOTE: All contrasts were significant at the .05 level or better. The number of subjects is given within parentheses. The lower the score for both subscores, the better.

Significant Differences in social behavior between male and female subjects were also perceived by the teachers on both the positive and negative subscales. Females were perceived to have more prosocial behavior and less antisocial behavior than males. This finding is also consistent with expectations based on reports such as that of Mischel (1966) which suggest that females are under greater socialization pressure than are males. The socialization of females has traditionally emphasized the development of prosocial behavior and the suppression of antisocial behavior. While there is some evidence, based on Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics (Clarizio & McCoy, 1983), that this emphasis is changing, the change would seem to be one of degree and not a change sufficient to bring about parity in social behavior between the sexes.

A significant difference across the two broad age groups in prosocial behavior was also perceived by teachers. The teachers saw a significant improvement in positive social behaviors with increasing age. This finding is consistent with the view that prosocial behavior is developmental and with the increased emphasis on social relations found in adolescence (Wenar, 1982).

Teachers also perceived a significant interaction between age and category on the negative subscale. BD subjects in both age groups had high scores for antisocial behavior. The SN subjects had significantly lower scores at both age levels, but there was a significant increase for the SN subjects in the older age group in contrast to SN subjects in the younger age group. This increase could perhaps be explained in part by the greater independence striving (Wenar, 1982) during the period of early adolescence which increases the likelihood of conflict even in normal youth. Further, the increased emphasis on social relations during

early adolescence should result in more opportunities to engage in both positive and negative social interactions.

Teachers clearly perceived marked differences in both prosocial and antisocial behavior in the BD and SN groups. Given the perceptions by teachers of social behavior in BD and SN students described in this paper, two observations concerning identification and programming can be made. First, there appears to be a perceived increase in antisocial behavior for normal students during early adolescence. Since many referrals for special education services are triggered by negative social behavior, caution should be exercised in the referral process for students in early adolescence. Increases in negative social behavior during this period may, in many cases, be normal and not an indication of a behavioral disorder. Second, the findings would suggest that these teachers would consider programming needs to be twofold. Programs for BD students, in addition to academics, should provide for the control and reduction of negative social behavior and for instruction in and practice of prosocial behaviors or social skills.

Finally, there is the issue of what has been measured in this study, perceptions of teachers or behavior of students. It would seem reasonable to believe that the results would correlate well with actual behavior (Miller & Funabiki, 1983; Siegel, Dragovich, & Marholin, III, 1976). Such a correlation, however, remains to be demonstrated with the modified SPSS and with behaviorally disordered students. The only thing that can be said with any confidence at this time is that the data obtained reflect the teachers' perceptions of student behavior. Whether or not the teachers' perceptions accurately correspond to actual behavior or is biased by such factors as expectations set by labels needs to be investigated. How teachers perceive student behavior, even when biased by expectations, is still an important consideration (Ysseldyke et al, 1982). Expectations can affect the way teachers interact with students. Differential treatment of students by teachers holds the potential for shaping different behaviors in students and thereby fulfilling the expectations of the teachers (Good & Brophy, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

One further point needs to be made. The BD subjects in this study were not randomly selected. The BD subjects represented the entire available population in the state, subject to the willingness of various school systems to participate. The data on normal subjects were obtained immediately following the collection of the data on BD subjects. An effort was made in collecting the SN data to ensure comparability with the BD subject pool in terms of age, sex, and race. In addition, an effort was made in collecting these data to ensure a mix of subjects from both urban and rural environments. The efforts to match the BD and SN groups on these various variables precluded the use of random selection in obtaining the SN subjects.

Further analysis of this data set is planned to identify the items that best discriminate between the behaviorally disordered and the socially normal. If items that discriminate well between these populations are found, attempts to establish behavioral validity and predictive validity will be made.

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