

SOCIAL PREFERENCE OF THIRD GRADE CHILDREN FROM THE YUCATAN TOWARD THEIR PEERS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

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Abstract

This work investigates social preferences of third grade children in the Yucatan, Mexico toward peers with obvious physical differences.

Drawings of children of both sexes with and without observable physical differences were presented individually to 300 pupils representing three different socioeconomic status (SES). Results were consistent with previous studies on this issue: children manifested more preference for peers without disability and less preference for those with orthopedic limitations. However, specific differences were found regarding both gender and SES. Girls showed more preference toward obese children than boys and obese children were less preferred by children from higher SES.

Acceptance and perception of children with physical disabilities by their peers either in the school or in playground settings has been a topic of interest for rehabilitation psychologists interested in the social development of children with notable physical differences.

Amongst the most important published works on this topic are: Goodman, Richardson, Dornbusch y Hastorf (1963); the studies of Richardson (1970, 1971a., 1971b, 1976 y 1983) Richardson y Royce (1968); and the work of Harper, Wacker y Seaborg, 1986.

This study used a method similar to the study of Harper, et al. (1986) whom inspired by the work of Richardson, attempted to establish the rank order of preference of American children toward peers with physical disabilities using pictures showing both normal children and children with diverse disabilities, asking children to state their likes and preferences. This study is a part of a major project under Harper's direction that attempts to establish cultural influences in social preference toward children with disabilities in various countries such as The United States, Mexico, New Zealand, Nepal and India.

Considering the basic assumption in Harper's work that pictures of children are suitable to establish social preferences. In this study, pictures of children with and without disabilities were drawn considering ethnic and cultural factored such as facial tarts and dressing.

Method

Subjects

300 third grade students (average age of 9) were interviewed. Children were selected from urban and rural areas of high, medium and low SES based upon a reliable method specified to the Yucatán (Sánchez & Canto, 1987).

Instruments

SES data and Mayan ethnic background were evaluated. Two sets of drawings (drawn 10 inches to scale -8 1/2 X 11 cards) were "field tested" (male/female) displaying children with and without physical disabilities. Disabilities reflected prevalence in the Yucatan and comparability with those used in prior studies by Harper (1986, 1992). Pictures reflected: (a) Child without disability; (b) child without a foot; (c) child with cleft- palate; (d) child without an arm below the elbow; (e) child using crutches; (f) obese child (see Figure 1.).

Procedures

Two interviewers were trained to administer the task to each subject individually as follows: (1) Greeting; (2) explanation of task; (3) demographic questionnaire; (4) display of drawings; (5) ranking of drawings - "Which of these children do you like most?"- or -"With which of these children would you like to play?"; After answering each questions (6) the subject was shown the picture chosen and asked -"Why did you choose the child?"; (7) Order of selection and reason were recorded, and finally, (8) the interviewer estimated the validity of answers.

Results

SES

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) among all the indicators across three schools was significant, (.001), thus defining three groups of SES.

Social preferences

Social preference rankings were analyzed using several statistical methods. In general, children most preferred drawings depicting children without physical disabilities and less preferred those displaying children with limb deformity. Children using crutches were less preferred than children with cleft - palate. These data are presented in table 1 and analyzed with Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) to evaluate the significance of a particular ranking (order of preference). Children with high SES reported greater preference for children using crutches and less for those without arms than pupils from middle and low SES backgrounds (ANOVA , < = .001). The low SES children more often expressed a greater preference to play with children with cleft - palate than did pupils from middle and high SES.

The most common reasons (first versus last) for a first choice were: s/he is normal or healthy (N=185), don't know (N=31), s/he is fat ((N=20), s/he can play (N=13), I like her/him (N=12), or s/he can run (N=4). When asking "Why didn't you like this child?", reasons were: Because of his hands or foot (N=67), don't know (N=42), S/he doesn't run (N=34), s/he is fat (N=22) or I don't like her/him (N=19).

The majority indicated that they chose a drawing because the child appeared "normal or healthy", because they liked the child or because the child was able to play or run. Similarly, least preference was attributed to lack of limbs or inability to play or run.

Children with obesity were identified more often in contrast to earlier studies and were reported as those with whom the subjects had the most contact. This result is logical since obesity occurs with a higher frequency in the Yucatán than the disabilities presented, and appears to have less stigma. Children reported knowing more children with cleft - palate than other disabilities. This was also expected since this is a condition with relative high incidence in the Yucatán.

Discussion

This study corroborates previous studies that children tend to prefer children without physical disabilities. In the Yucatán, physical disability stigmatizes a child and defines him in terms of abnormality or physical deformity which limits his functional capacity.

The data suggest that in the Yucatán obesity is not necessarily considered something to be avoided as is more common in Western cultures. Drawings of obese children were chosen second after normal children. Females demonstrated greater preference for playing with obese children than males, perhaps related to different playing behaviors at this age between genders. This is important since few gender differences with regard to social preference have been previously reported in similar studies. Attention is called to the greater acceptance of cleft - palate relative to other disabilities. This is contrary to Richardson's (1983) and Harper's (1992) findings. Such preference may be due to the high incidence of this condition in the Yucatán or the greater importance of functional limitations over esthetics in relation to play behavior. Accordingly, the disabilities that limit play (e.g. absence of limbs or possession of crutches), significantly influence preference. Again, these latter data (functional impact) are consistent with Richardson (1983). The fact that middle class students demonstrate less preference for children with obesity than do children from low and high social status reflect the variation of social preference with regard to obesity as a function of SES.

Like previous studies, the Yucatán study suggests that a child's cultural background influences his/her perception of peers with noticeable physical differences. It also suggests that the child's gender and SES are influential as well. Future research might substitute strabismus for obesity because this disability is very

common in the region and conveys both esthetic and functional implications (Sánchez & Cantón, 1993) and because it was a sign of beauty among the Mayan, the ethnic group that characterizes de Yucatán.

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