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An Approach to the Study of Social Behavior in Children

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AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL
BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN

HAROLD M. WILLIAMS

In the present study of social development, the situation-response analysis has been used as the primary basis. On this basis the actual behavior of children in concretely described situations has constituted the primary data. Previous experiments have almost without exception used the technique of rating individual children on certain social traits. These ratings have usually been made on the basis of the observer's general impression. When the original records are made in terms of such traits it becomes at once impossible to get beyond such ratings to the primary concrete events which presumably constituted the basis for the ratings. When the original records present sequences of actual happenings, however, it is entirely possible to analyze them both for trait categories and for rating values in terms of these categories.

The following conceptions have, therefore, been introduced in the present study of social development. Social behavior is conceived as being behavior which is rather immediately orientated toward other individuals. Generally speaking, one may use as the unit of observation the social contact. The contact is defined as a sequence of events having usually an initiation, a series of happenings, and a closure. The individual under observation is defined as the subject.

Within these definitions it seems to be possible to think of at least four continua in social relationships, each of which is more or less amenable to measurement. These are the situation, the social norm, the individual's understanding, and the overt behavior of the individual. The first continuum is defined in terms of the objective situation or the problem which the individual has to meet and solve in some way. Analysis of the first continuum will yield categories which may be described as types of social relationship. The second continuum is defined in terms of the group rule or the generally accepted standard of conduct which applies in the particular situation as defined in the first category. In the third continuum are considered the problems of the degree of comprehension or social insight which the individual has. In the last con-

tinuum we consider what the individual actually did in meeting the problem situation.

A further criticism of previous conceptions in the field of social development is that in practically all cases the attention has been centered on the response to the exclusion of the situation-stimulus. It is as if the mental testers had studied the responses of the child without knowing what the test items were. By turning the spotlight on the situation it becomes possible both to inventory the social problems the child must solve and to introduce a rational basis of classification into the list of social relationships.

In the present project, minute reports of the actual sequences of events in social contacts are recorded in narrative form. As soon as convenient after the original recordings, the data are tabulated in parallel columns. In the first column are stated all the events occurring in the contact other than the behavior of the subject. In the second column are recorded the subject's responses. It is possible then to record in a third parallel column the group rule or the social norm which applies to this situation. It has not been possible to derive directly out of this type of observation what the child's comprehension of the situation and the social norm is. This has been approached independently by a picture-interview technique in which typical situations are presented to the child and questions are asked which aim to evoke his understanding of the situations and the norms applying to them.

As a first check on reliability two observers were put to work under the meagre instructions to "record everything that seemed of social significance in a contact." The total number of events recorded by both was taken as the criterion. Of this total number of some 500 events, 50 per cent were reported identically by both observers. It was found by analysis that most of the discrepancies occurred by one or the other observer omitting events at the beginning or end of the contact. Under reinstruction to correct this discrepancy alone the agreement jumped to 80 per cent. Further refinements have raised the reliability of this apparently naive type of observation to a plane comparable with the reliabilities reported by other workers on extremely attenuated materials.

With regard to the analysis into categories, it is proposed to have as many within each continuum as seems necessary. With this approach, it is possible to have as many individuals as one wishes to develop or vote on a set of categories. Typical classes of situations or types of social relationship which seem to be appearing are:

Situations involving property rights.

Situations involving personal rights.

Situations involving coöperative participation in play.

Situations involving obedience to duly constituted authority and so on.

Within each situation category various types of response are appearing. For example, with respect to situation involving property rights, such behaviors as aggressive taking away from another child a toy in violation to group rules, asking the other child for the toy, offering another toy in exchange, asking the teacher for help, waiting until the other child has voluntarily relinquished the toy, and so on have been found.

The normative criterion forms the point of reference in terms of which these various types of behavior may be evaluated. In certain cases the norm is given in terms of group rules; in others it will be necessary to appeal to group judgment as to what is the most desirable type of behavior. In either case, variants from the accepted type of response can be given quantitative judgmental values.

In response to the picture situations a wide range of responses has been obtained. The correlation of the test with age and mental age were 0.38 and 0.47 for 30 cases. From the scatter diagrams it was apparent that these correlations were substantially increased by the inclusion of some children of the two-year level. Apparently, then, the test is measuring something other than intelligence, verbal facility (which correlates highly with intelligence), or age.

Eventually it is hoped that a measuring instrument can be developed which will incorporate a series of significant social relationships with respect to which the individual child's behavior can be measured in a fairly well-controlled set of situations.

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