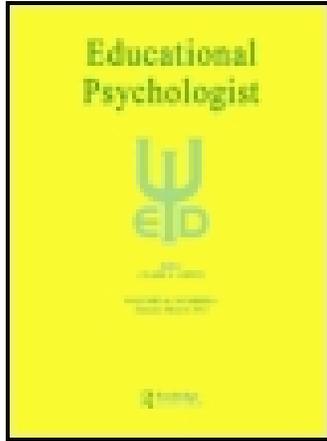


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### The social psychology of education: New field of study or just educational psychology?

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# THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION: NEW FIELD OF STUDY OR JUST EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY?<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The social psychology of education is examined to determine its status as a unique field of study. Recent research in five areas of specialization, attribution theory, school organization, group dynamics, teacher-pupil relationships, and affective learning is summarized to indicate substantive advances in the field. The contribution of educational social psychology in interpreting school learning is cited with a corresponding theory of learning. Two themes which are pervasive in the social psychology of education, the importance of attitudinal outcomes and the influence of interactions between each person and school social structures on individual behavior, are summarized with implications for educational psychologists.

In 1973, W. W. Charters published a paper entitled "Social Psychology and Education: An Essay Review of Lindzey-Aronson, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*" (Charters, 1973). The purpose of the review was to show how the themes of social psychology are related to education and the usefulness of a social psychology of education, if such a unique "discipline" actually exists. He elaborated on how this area of study might develop into a separate, specialized field, but emphasized that, in its present form, it was the choice of inquiry of a few educational psychologists with few distinctive contributions to educational problems. He also recognized the potential of such a focus if built on the substantial amount of research completed by social psychologists. In Charters' words: "The points of congruity between the perspective of social psychology and the persistent, unresolved problems of educational institutions are sufficiently notable to make the field worth attending" (Charters, 1973, pp. 78).

It seems that, indeed, a speciality called the social psychology of education, or educational social psychology, has evolved over the past few years. Not only have several new books been published which reflect this view (Bany & Johnson, 1975; Bar-Tal & Saxe, in press; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Schumuk & Schmuck, 1974) but, more important, there is a growing body of specialized research which is building a knowledge and theoretical base for the field. Since much of this research is drawn from work done by social psychologists, its perspective on teaching-learning is one which many educational psychologists have not been exposed to. Yet, this field of study provides important approaches to the study of pupil learning and substantiates the impact of variables previously unknown, considered unimportant, or thought unmeasurable. These advances have, in some cases, corresponded to the areas delineated

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by Charters from three textbooks written in the social psychology of education, but have tended to exclude topics which more clearly are associated with the Sociology of Education (pre-school socialization, social stratification, racial segregation and desegregation). More recent literature suggests that the field is defined by educational researchers who believe that social phenomena interact with traditional psychological notions to create a different view of what influences teaching-learning in educational settings. While many of these researchers are educational psychologists, the important result is that this unique area of study should be an integral part of training those who conduct research, write, consult and teach others about how to solve educational problems. The purpose of this paper is to update Charters' article, with attention given to research which defines what a social psychology of education might consist of—in the opinion of the author.

The research and literature in this "new" field has identified several areas of specialization, though there are two major themes which are common to all, 1) the importance of "attitude" or "affect" in learning outcomes, 2) that individual behavior is dependent on interactions between each person and school groups and social structure. The discrete areas of specialization, in the view of this writer, include: attribution theory, school organization, group dynamics, teacher-pupil relationships and affective learning. Each of these areas has contributed substantial research and together comprise a body of knowledge upon which a theory of learning can be postulated. Thus, a social psychology of learning may become a viable alternative to either the Gestalt-cognitive or behaviorist learning theories. In what follows, research in each of the specialized areas is summarized to indicate the perspective of a social psychology of education in interpreting learning outcomes.

### 1. *Attribution Theory:*

This area corresponds closely to what Charters views as the phenomenological component in social psychology, that perceptions of the individual are important in determining the causes of behavior. Weiner (1977) has summarized research of attributional conceptions and discusses how attribution theory contributes to our understanding of the interaction between individuals and the environment to give causal explanations of outcomes. The perception of the individual will depend on various personality factors such as locus of control (Rotter, 1966; Phares, 1976) and achievement motivation (McClelland, 1965), and by the conditions surrounding a specific situation. It has been found that, for instance, persons with an internal locus of control and high in achievement motivation usually believe that innate ability and degree of effort in the task are the most important causes for success or failure—if successful it was because they had the ability or put forth the necessary effort to succeed, while if they fail it was simply because they did not exert enough effort. On the other hand, persons with an external locus of control and low achievement motivation believe that factors they have little control over, the difficulty of the task and luck, will determine success, while lack of ability is the cause of failure. While specific conditions of the task supply information to help determine the relative importance of each of the four causal factors (factors such as past successes and failures, time spent at the task, and the performance of others) pervasive individual differences in personality such as locus of control are the primary determinants. This area of research is helpful in explaining the affective consequences of behavior, since the meaning of "success" or "failure" will vary depending on the conditions mentioned above. Pupils who attribute success to internal

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factors are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the task, feel a sense of competence and have greater motivation than are pupils who believe that they were just lucky to succeed. The work by Deci (1975) is also related to explanations of causality. He found that pupils with initial interest in a task will be less motivated to engage in the activity if extrinsically rewarded for performing the task. In this case, "reasons" for completing the activity influence the perceived worth of the task.

Covington and Beery (1976) have extended the notions of attribution theory to explain how self-esteem is developed and protected by students in school settings. Briefly, they describe how each individual formulates a level of aspiration or self-standard which defines "success" or "failure". In other words, what is perceived as a "success" to one student can be a "failure" to another. Locus of control and achievement motivation help determine level of aspiration to either avoid failure to maintain success, in either case protecting and enhancing self-esteem. The strategies some students use to avoid failure include setting low goals or standards, psychologically withdrawing from the task, or by setting unusually high expectations—so high that failure would not be a threat to one's ability. This line of research has obvious implications for developing self-concept and dispersal of rewards which are meaningful to students.

In summary, attribution theory contributes significantly to our understanding of individual differences and promises to be an important variable in Aptitude-Treatment-Interaction studies. The focus of the research is usually applied, and according to Weiner:

is relevant to a wide array of classroom phenomena and educational issues including achievement evaluation and potential evaluation conflict, the relation between achievement and moral motivational systems, headstart programs, subjective expectancy of success, self-concept maintenance, selection procedures, achievement strivings, choice among achievement tasks, desire for self-evaluation, achievement change programs, feelings of helplessness and the undermining effect of external reward on internal interest.

(Weiner, 1977)

### 2. *School Organization:*

Many writers have stressed that the organizational properties of schools influence student learning and socialization (Bidwell, 1965; Dreeben, 1968, 1973; Jackson, 1968; Schmuck & Miles, 1971). Organizational attributes are an important aspect of the environment students interact with and certain structural characteristics will determine the nature of the environment, or as some might say, the "climate" of the school. As such, it is a part of what Bronfenbrenner (1976) calls the "ecology of education," an approach to educational research which integrates aspects of the environment with individual differences to assess learning outcomes. The focus of this area is in explaining how a particular "climate" promulgates student similarity. This corresponds to another "theme" of social psychology identified by Charters, the stress on uniformity, not individuality.

Most of the literature in this area has been theoretical or conjectural about the influences of organizational properties, based on research from other disciplines. It is well known that schools are bureaucratically organized in many respects and are classified by some as "institutions," with a hierarchy of control, operation according to rules, specialization or division of labor and specific criteria for promotion, roles

and positions. As schools become highly structured and differentiated properties are created which promote certain norms for behavior and expectations. These norms and expectations which together make up the "climate" of the school will affect learning and the nature of students experiences. The work of Jackson (1968) is a classic illustration of the effect of the school environment on pupil learning. Jackson shows how aspects of classroom life which are a result of organizational structures and institutional properties—existing in a "crowd", compulsory attendance, stress on rules and uniformity, routinized schedules of activities, pervasive evaluation—eventuate in pupils learning to subjugate their own desires, interests, and wants to the needs of others. Students are rewarded not for being curious or creative but for acquiescing to those behaviors which result in order and efficiency.

Other aspects of the organization of schools include (a) components or subsystems responsible for decision making and evaluation, (b) goals and objectives which are formulated and communicated through programs, rules and activities, (c) inter-relationships with agencies outside of the school, (d) the relationships between the subsystems, how the processes through which the subsystems operate influence trust, openness, and feelings between people, and (e) the norms and roles which develop to support goals and objectives. Each of these factors will influence the type of environment students live in and thus have a direct bearing on what students learn.

Some research has demonstrated that specific organizational attributes affect student learning. Barker and Gump (1964) studied the effect of school size on student participation in activities and found that important differences exist between large and small high schools in the kinds of experiences students have. Students in a small school are more likely to hold positions of importance and responsibility and participate in a wider variety of extracurricular activities than are students who attend a large school.

Brookover and his associates (Brookover, *et. al.*, 1976) have pioneered research of social-psychological variables associated with schools which are related to achievement. By comparing schools which are similar in student socio-economic and racial composition but different in levels of academic achievement, Brookover has shown that school norms and expectations of teachers, students and principals for achievement are significantly related to differences in achievement between similar schools. The norms and expectations define what students are able to learn and what behaviors are appropriate. The emphasis is on examining the school social structure to explain why students are similar, not different. Of course, other factors could be associated with the variables Brookover has defined which actually cause the difference in achievement, and the higher levels of achievement could result in the expectations. However, this research represents a promising approach to understanding how different school environments affect learning and behavior.

Research of open or informal schools, which have definite organizational differences from traditional schools, has indicated significant differences in student outcomes (Wright, 1975). Finally, several instructional innovations have affected school organization and student learning, such as Computer Aided Instruction, Individually Guided Education, or Program for Learning in Accordance to Needs (Gage & Berliner, 1975).

### 3. *Group Dynamics:*

A third theme identified by Charters is entitled "The Power of the Group." This is an appropriate heading, since the nature of group dynamics is perhaps the most im-

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portant component of a social psychology of education. A large number of studies have been done on classroom groups (Getzels, 1969), and there is now sufficient empirical evidence to suggest specific guidelines educators can follow with groups to improve learning. Schmuck and Schmuck (1975) present a comprehensive analysis of group processes, and show how certain activities can promote a more positive classroom "climate" or environment. They suggest that personal needs for (a) achievement or competence, (b) processing potential influence over others, and (c) feeling a sense of affiliation and affection, will best be met if the individual is a member of a group which displays: high yet accurate interpersonal expectations, dispersed leadership among all group members including the teacher, diffuse friendship patterns, norms which emphasize a wide range of tolerable behavior and academic achievement, teacher-student and student-student communication which is frequent, open, and trusting; a high sense of cohesiveness in the group. If these aspects of the group are properly developed the interpersonal feelings will be warm, supportive, and respectful, resulting in greater motivation, increased self-esteem and high academic achievement.

The notion of classroom climate has been with us for some time, (Anderson, 1939; Withall, 1952; Flanders, 1965), and recent research by Walberg (1969), Trickett and Moss (1973), Randhawa and Michayluk (1975), and Solomon and Kendall (1976), among others, has demonstrated that the environment of the classroom can have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Nielsen and Kirk (1974) have summarized instrumentation available to measure classroom environments and conclude that while most of the research is correlational, it is a promising start to investigate the relationship between learning environments and learning outcomes. The research of David and Roger Johnson (1974; 1975) has shown that the nature of group interdependence, characterized by cooperative, competitive, or individualized types of interactions between students may determine how well different types of instructional objectives will be attained. Their work has focused on student relations with each other and the teacher in pursuit of instructional goals. Again, though the research is correlational, it suggests that in a cooperative setting, one in which students must work together to achieve objectives, there exists positive interpersonal processes and a greater likelihood of attaining thinking and problem solving skills, creativity, positive transfer of concepts and principles, favorable attitudes toward self, others, the school and subject area.

It is encouraging to note the increased attention given to school groups. The social structure of formal or informal groups will significantly influence how well individual needs are met. If groups are not effective in providing security, enjoyment, status, and affiliation, students will look for other ways to meet these needs, often by becoming psychologically alienated, or by exhibiting "behavior problems". Groups which are cohesive will also facilitate the attainment of interpersonal, self-concept, and social objectives. The development of skills in interpersonal relationships is fundamental to effective groups, and educators can facilitate this important area. It is clear that the impact of the group on student's perceptions of themselves, on establishing a particular environment, on establishing norms and expectations for behavior, and on providing the psychological prerequisites for cognitive learning is well established.

#### 4. *Teacher-Pupil Relationships:*

A fourth broad area of relevance to the social psychology of education, although not separately identified by Charters, is the nature of teacher-pupil relations. Several

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different research thrusts are relevant to this area; some focus on the development of positive pupil-teacher relations, while others specify how pupil-teacher relationships influence learning.

Brophy and Good (1974) summarize how teacher attitudes toward students are formed through perceptions based on student characteristics, and show how these attitudes effect interactions between students and teachers. They conclude that some teachers at the primary grade level, especially those who are less competent, secure, and confident, vary interactions with students they have different attitudes toward. Students who concern the teacher most as needing help, for instance, are more likely to receive praise and positive attention while students who are viewed as unhealthy for the classroom are treated with hostility and rejection. Generally, teachers prefer students who are high achieving, conforming and orderly to those who are assertive and independent, and such preferences are extended to interactions between students and teacher. Female teachers at the elementary level prefer students with qualities usually associated with girls and are annoyed by behavior associated with boys, although there is no conclusive evidence on the effect of these preferences on student achievement. The sex of pupils in early grades is related to teacher-student interactions. Boys, often more active and assertive than girls, tend to receive more criticism for misbehavior than girls and interact in most ways more often with the teacher than girls do. Other, specific individual differences of teachers and students and the effect of these differences are also summarized by Brophy and Good.

An important aspect of teacher-pupil relations has been called "teacher expectations". Initiated with the classic but much criticized *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), the teacher expectancy phenomenon has received a great deal of attention and research. Brophy and Good (1974) summarize much of the research done on this topic, and conclude that while expectancy and the self-fulfilling prophesy can operate to effect student learning and the nature of teacher-student interactions, it is likely that only those teachers who are ineffective allow expectancies to have a significant impact on their relationships with students. The specific conditions which lead to expectancy and the way in which expectancies are communicated to students are summarized by Braun (1976).

The teacher's style of leadership will probably effect learning outcomes and the climate of the classroom. The leadership of the teacher is carried through interactions with students. The best known categorization of styles is provided by White and Lippitt (1960). A review of studies in classrooms by Anderson (1959) confirms that a "democratic" style of leadership will result in only slightly less achievement but a much more positive environment than an "authoritarian" style. Guskin and Guskin (1976) summarize how the type of leadership power a teacher uses—reward, coercive, referent, expert, or legitimate—will influence teacher-pupil relations and classroom climate. Bany and Johnson (1975) and Schmuck and Schmuck (1975) summarize other aspects of leadership and stress how this interpersonal process effects learning outcomes.

The well-known work of Flanders (1970) and Medley and Mitzel (1963) introduced a new research tool, systematic observation, to measure teacher-student interactions. The usefulness of this type of research in specifying classroom behavior by objectively measuring quantitatively different kinds of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions is evidenced by the large number of observational instruments which have been de-

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veloped (Simon & Boyer, 1970). There is some evidence that teaching which is characterized by more "indirect" than "direct" interactions is positively related to better cognitive achievement and attitudinal development (Amidon & Hough, 1967). Other investigators have also found positive results in correlating interactions with pupil outcomes, and the use of instruments for systematic observation is becoming widespread (Rosenshine & Furst, 1973). Despite methodological problems which need to be solved (Herbert & Attridge, 1975), this approach to research is potentially one of the most useful to describe, categorize, and summarize the nature of pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil interactions which effect relationships and classroom environments.

### 5. *Affective Learning:*

Affective learning has been used to describe a wide range of interests, motivation, feelings, emotion, and dispositions related to the student, learning, school, subject matter, and other aspects of the educational environment. The terms "values" and "attitudes" have been used to specify affective learning, but it would be unreasonable to include such diverse and wide ranging areas as values clarification as a speciality of the social psychology of education. Rather, only those aspects of affective education which are associated with what social psychologists have termed "attitudes", feeling for or against, favorable or unfavorable, or pro or con toward something or someone should be included. Charters refers to this area as another "component" of the social psychology of education in his 1973 article.

While there is a substantial body of research concerned with attitude development and change in social psychology, little systematic, experimental research of school related attitudes has been conducted (Ringness, 1975; Kahn & Weiss, 1973). Most of what has been done is correlational and/or has been in the context of studies whose primary objective is measuring cognitive achievement. Interestingly, attitude outcomes have been an area of study of educators longer than the other specialties of a social psychology of education but has received less research to generate theories and a base of accepted knowledge than have the other areas. Consider, for instance, the large number of studies to examine expectancies—no similar degree of attention has ever been given attitudes in education. Two reasons for the lack of research are in the first stage of resolution. One has been the confusion and disagreement over a definition of the construct "attitude". It is generally accepted in social psychology that an "attitude" is a disposition to be favorable or unfavorable to an object, but, more important, is composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Triandis, 1971). The implication of this definition is that an attitude is not simply a generalized notion, it is a complex orientation toward something depending on environmental conditions. Thus, it is possible that a pupil will not enjoy, or dislike doing mathematics (affective component) but at the same time believe mathematics is valuable or worthwhile (cognitive component). A generalized definition of attitude would fail to discern this complexity. The second difficulty with attitudes has been the ability to measure the construct. Measurement remains a problem, but there are some signs that attention to instruments and methods for attitude assessment is increasing. Some new literature has been published in attitude assessment (Sinaiko & Broedling, 1976; Severy, 1974), and regional workshops were held in 1976 by Phi Delta Kappa on the topic of affective measurement. The utility of multivariate statistics will more accurately and easily facilitate attitude measurement.

The research which has been conducted on attitudes in education suggests some

directions for subsequent studies. Jackson (1968) reviews several studies which show that pupil attitudes toward school decline as students progress through grade levels, but also shows that these attitudes are not related to scholastic success. The literature on pupil attitudes toward school subjects suggests that several variables are positively related to attitude toward school subjects (McMillan, 1976). These include teacher enthusiasm for the subject, pupil's feelings of success associated with the subject, a positive classroom climate or environment, classroom activities which are challenging, fun, relevant, etc., the attainment of rewards following achievement in a subject (the effect of rewards is complex, depending on personality factors of the students such as locus of control, the nature of the reward—extrinsic or intrinsic, i.e., Deci (1975), the effect associated with the task, and expectations), student self-concept, parental attitudes, and past experiences in the subject area.

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Each of the specialized areas is related to what Brookover and Erickson (1969, 1975) have called "a social psychological conception of learning". According to this view, learning is based on the feedback people receive from others who are important to them and each of the areas discussed above influences the quality of feedback a person uses to influence his own behavior. A person behaves in ways which he perceives are appropriate or proper, as determined by cues and responses from significant others and reference groups. A conception of self-image is formed through each person's interactions with others who are important and it is this self-image, along with situational norms, which determines behavior. The social environment, consisting of group and organizational properties, will influence the type and quality of interactions the individual uses to formulate a self-concept. The specific feedback the individual perceives as important will depend on his personality and expectations, the presence or absence of significant others, and how well individual needs (such as feeling competent, having influence over others belonging to group) are being met by the social environment. For example, if a pupil's need for affiliation and love is not met by the group he interacts with, he will be sensitive to information which will help fulfill his need. The implication of this theory is clear; if we can control the values, expectations, and norms that parents, teachers, administrators, and other pupils hold for an individual, that person's behavior can be affected.

#### *SUMMARY*

The intent of this discussion is to provide some evidence and rationale for the existence of a social psychology of education. The field was viewed by Charters as "worth attending" five years ago, and it is the opinion of this writer that the relevance of a social psychological conception has, since his essay, been demonstrated with research. Happily, it is applied research, in the main, and promises to have great practical utility.

The social psychology of education provides a perspective which extends the individual psychological emphasis most educational psychologists receive to include the social environments students interact with. It is the nature of this interaction which lies at the heart of most research in the area, from groups and organizational properties to explanations of behavior based on individual perceptions. The empirical emphasis on attitudinal outcomes is also an extension of much training which concentrates on cognitive achievement. Obviously, I have been rather dogmatic in my assertions about the existence of a social psychology of education. My hope is that this approach will stimulate responses. At the very least, I hope greater consideration will be given to this area of research by educational psychologists.

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