

Identification of Mental Retardation by the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment: Nondiscriminatory or Nonexistent?

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The effects of applying the dual-criterion classification system for mental retardation in connection with the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) were investigated by using the SOMPA standardization sample as subjects. Average scaled scores on the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC) were paired (a) with Full Scale IQ (FSIQ) Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised or (b) with the SOMPA-derived Estimated Learning Potential (ELP). The children performing below the third percentile on either combination of measures were thus classified as "mentally retarded." By the FSIQ and ELP procedures, 0.6% and 0.2%, respectively, of the children were so classified; the overwhelming majority of the children were of minority background. The implications for the diagnostic category of mild mental retardation and the further use of the SOMPA are discussed.

The identification of children as mentally retarded has been greatly modified over the past decade (a) by changes in the American Association of Mental Deficiency (AAMD) definition of mental retardation (Grossman, 1973, 1977, 1983) to include the dual criterion of impaired intellectual functioning and impaired adaptive behavior and (b) by legal attention, for example, Public Law 94-142 and court cases (*Diana v. State of California*, 1970; *Guadalupe v. Tempe Elementary School District*, 1972; *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1979) emphasizing the need for nondiscriminatory assessment. Although current practice in the assessment of both intelligence and adaptive behavior reflects these "state of the art" requirements in the fields both of law and of school psychology, a dilemma is posed for implementation: Application of both criteria has been recommended, or even required, for classification, yet there has been little research to show the effects of applying the dual-criterion standard on a wide scale. The studies that are available have generally focused on students already labeled as mentally retarded (by a single IQ criterion), and it has been reported that they show significant numbers of these students have been declassified—made ineligible for classification—under the dual criterion: Fisher (1977) reported the declassification of 74% of 46 students; Scott (1979) showed a declassification rate of 45% of 596 Texas students; Mascari and Forgnone (1982) similarly obtained a 45% rate in Florida; Childs (1982) reported 80% declassification.

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Psychologists in the schools must attend to the effects of applying the dual criterion as they choose among the assessment instruments available. The System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) (Mercer, 1979; Mercer & Lewis, 1978) was designed specifically to provide a method for assessing intellectual performance and adaptive behavior within the same set of procedures in a culturally sensitive manner. There are concerns, however, about the use of the SOMPA for classification before appropriate research has been carried out (Beck, 1984; Brown, 1979a, 1979b; Figueroa, 1979; Oakland 1979, 1980; Reschly, 1982; Reynolds, 1985; Sandoval, 1985; Talley, 1979). Questions have been raised about the validity of the Estimated Learning Potential (ELP) (Brown, 1979a, 1979b; Goodman, 1979; Humphreys, 1985; Jirsa, 1983; Montague, 1981; Oakland, 1979, 1980; Yonge, 1982) and the generalizability of the norms to other geographical and ethnic groups (Brown, 1979b; Oakland, 1980; Reschly, 1978). Use of the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC) in school-related decision making has been questioned because it lacks content associated with school functioning (a major component of adaptive behavior in the school-aged child) (Kazimour & Reschly, 1981; Reschly, 1982; Sandoval, 1985; Witt & Martens, 1984). Furthermore, the ABIC does not significantly increase the accuracy of predicted achievement and school performance above that of the WISC-R IQ alone (Oakland, 1983).

It is in the use of the SOMPA for classification and placement decisions, given all the concerns expressed above, that numerous questions still exist. The studies mentioned above of the effects of applying the dual-criterion definition in general focused on students already labeled as mentally retarded, and, in all cases, significant numbers of children were declassified under the new criteria. The ABIC was the adaptive behavior measure used in two of these studies (Fischer, 1977; Scott, 1979). Reschly (1981) provided information more applicable to general classification decisions in his study of a random sample of students and the effects of the dual-criterion system when SOMPA measures were used. He compared the proportions of children who would be found eligible for mental retardation classification by using combinations of WISC-R IQ, ABIC scores, and the ELP and reported that less than 0.5% of the children were classified as mentally retarded when criteria required that all three scores be below two standard deviations below the mean.

What is missing yet is close consideration of the dual criterion applied to the SOMPA sample itself. The random sample of California schoolchildren should, in theory, produce a prevalence of mental retardation similar to that in the general population. The use in classification decisions of norms derived from this sample is based on just this premise. The purpose of the present study was to assess the effects of applying the dual-criterion classification approach to the SOMPA standardization sample. The specific questions addressed were: (a) What is the nature and prevalence of mental retardation in the SOMPA standardization sample? (b) Are these results the same for different ethnic groups?

METHODS

Sample

Archival data, collected by Mercer (1979) in the standardization of the SOMPA, were analyzed. The "subjects" were the 1,913 children (627 black, 617 Hispanic, 669 Anglo)

from the SOMPA sample for whom both ABIC and WISC-R data were available. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in each ethnic group across year levels. For a more detailed description of the subjects and the randomized subject selection procedure, refer to Mercer (1979).

Procedure

The dual-criterion system for the classification of mental retardation was applied by using ABIC Average Scaled scores in combination first with the WISC-R Full Scale IQ and then with the Full Scale ELP from Mercer's data. The cutoff recommended by the AAMD (Grossman, 1983) and by Mercer (1979; Mercer & Lewis, 1978), that is, scores below the third percentile, was used: The cutoffs corresponded to WISC-R FSIQs less than 72, ELPs less than 72, and ABIC Average Scaled scores less than 22. The resulting numbers of children eligible for classification, and the percentage identified, as mentally retarded were tabulated.

RESULTS

Low and varying numbers of children were identified as mentally retarded when different measures were used (see Table 1).

Thirty-eight children (2.0% of the sample) were below the cutoff on adaptive behavior; 103 children (5.4%) were below the cutoff for intellectual functioning upon application of the WISC-R FSIQ. When those scores were transformed to Full Scale ELPs, 38 children (2.0%) fell below the cutoff. Applying a combination of measures to comply with the dual-criterion classification system would yield a considerably decreased number of children to be classified as mentally retarded. Eleven children

Table 1
Number of Children in the SOMPA Standardization Sample
Performing Below the 3% Cutoff on the
SOMPA Components (ABIC, WISC-R, ELP)

Group	SOMPA components					
		ABIC	WISC-R	ELP	ABIC/ WISC-R	ABIC/ ELP
Anglo (<i>N</i> = 669)	No.	12	10	8	1	0
	PE	1.8	1.5	1.2	0.1	0.0
	PT	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.0
Hispanic (<i>N</i> = 617)	No.	20	37	20	9	3
	PE	3.2	6.0	3.2	1.5	0.5
	PT	1.0	1.9	1.0	0.5	0.2
Black (<i>N</i> = 627)	No.	6	56	10	1	0
	PE	1.0	8.9	1.6	0.2	0.0
	PT	0.3	2.9	0.5	0.1	0.0
Total (<i>N</i> = 1,913)	No.	38	103	38	11	3
	PT	2.0	5.4	2.0	0.6	0.2

Note: N, Number of children identified; PE, Percentage of ethnic group; PT, Percentage of total sample.

(0.6% of the sample) fell below the cutoff on both the ABIC and the WISC-R. Only three children (0.2%) met both criteria so as to be classified as mentally retarded on the basis of the ABIC and the ELP.

A closer look at other information on those individual children may decrease the number eligible for classification even further: Of the 11 children qualifying under the ABIC/WISC-R FSIQ combination, 6 were Hispanic children whose WISC-R Performance Scale IQ was 72 or above (see Table 2).

Although Mercer did not clearly define the characteristics of the Hispanic children in her sample, the $VIQ < PIQ$ pattern of these 6 children resembles that of other bilingual children (Kaufman, 1979). Caution has been advised in the use of either the Verbal or the Full Scale IQ when the WISC-R is applied to classification decisions with Hispanic or bilingual children (Clarizo, 1982; Kaufman, 1979), and in the use of the ELP when there is a question of English proficiency (Wilén & Sweeting, 1986). In the period since the SOMPA was introduced, inclusion of the additional measure of language proficiency has been strongly recommended for all Hispanic children (Figueroa, 1982; Wilén & Sweeting, 1986). All three of the children qualifying under the ABIC/ELP Full Scale combination were Hispanic, and at least one of them had ELP subscale scores above the cutoff. If the children with Performance subscale scores on the WISC-R or ELP of 72 or above are excluded, a total of between 2 and 5 of 1,913 children (0.1–0.3% of the sample) are left to be classified as mentally retarded.

DISCUSSION

The present study and Reschly (1981) found prevalence rates resulting from the dual-criterion classification system of the SOMPA to be less than 0.5%, a value that is substantially lower than the traditional estimated 3% of the general population and is more similar to rates typically reported for moderate and severe retardation (Grossman, 1983; Reschly, 1982; Robinson & Robinson, 1976). The resulting classified population is not only smaller but likely more severely impaired (Polloway & Smith, 1983). Use of the dual-criterion system may effectively eliminate the diagnostic category of mild mental retardation (Kazimour & Reschly, 1981). The SOMPA measures appear to function in this manner; however, inasmuch as the identified children were mostly Hispanic, the SOMPA still may fail as a nondiscriminatory procedure.

This shrinking mild mental retardation population, reflected by the declassification of many children previously so classified, has stirred controversy: It is assumed that more restrictive classification criteria will prevent mislabeling and overrepresentation of minority students, but they also deny children access to services when they fail to meet these restrictive criteria. Although approximately half of the "declassified" students studied in one school system were found to be eligible for other special education programs, the other half of them were not eligible for existing programs despite intellectual and academic performance well below average (Scott, 1979). Reschly (1982) asserted that "declassification in and of itself is a nonsolution" (p. 233) to the problems of faulty classification systems. He is joined by others in the recommendations that (a) alternatives to declassification be considered by multidisciplinary teams (Witt & Martens, 1984), and (b) classification and intervention cannot be considered separately but must be considered jointly to best serve the needs of the children concerned (Hobbs, 1975; Oakland & Goldwater, 1979).

Also embroiled in this controversy specifically is the use of the SOMPA in classifica-

Table 2
WISC-R and ELP Scores by Ethnicity of
Eleven Children Identified by the
ABIC/WISC-R Combination

Ethnicity	WISC-R IQ ^a			ELP ^a		
	V	P	FS	V	P	FS
Anglo	66	69	67	85	76	80
Hispanic	65	78	70	73	78	73
	68	72	69	Not available ^b		
	64	84	71	85	90	84
	55	82	68	67	84	74
	60	80	69	80	82	80 ^c
	69	52	58	91	50	66
	52	84	67	Not available ^b		
	49	69	55	70	72	65 ^c
	69	65	65	70	65	60 ^c
Black	68	65	64	82	74	76

^aV, Verbal Scale scores; P, Performance Scale scores; FS, Full Scale scores.

^bELP scores were not available for these subject in the SOMPA standardization data.

^cThis subject was also identified using ABIC/ELP scores.

tion decisions. If fewer than 0.5% of children meet the criteria for classification as mentally retarded, there will be increasingly fewer children served in existing special education programs, but more and more children in the regular classroom may be needing special attention that is not currently being provided on a regular basis by the financially stretched public school system. Beyond these issues is that of the overall validity of the SOMPA for classification purposes. Does it accurately identify mentally retarded children? If the results of this study based on the SOMPA standardization sample itself are any indication, the answer must be "Probably not." Not only does the prevalence of mental retardation approach the disappearing mark; the overwhelming majority of children who met the dual-criterion standard were of minority background (9 Hispanic and 1 Black out of the total 11 children in the ABIC/WISC-R combination; 3 Hispanic out of 3 in the ABIC/ELP combination). Although the SOMPA is intended to be nondiscriminatory in the identification of mentally retarded children, its use is questionable and may, in effect, make mild mental retardation nonexistent.

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