Prevalence and Constituency of Behavioral Disturbance Taxonomies in the Regular School Population

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The Bristol Social Adjustment Guides (BSAG) are widely employed in research and in the identification of maladjustment in school children. The BSAG provides scores on several indices including five homogeneous behavioral syndromes and one associated grouping. Field experience suggests that maladjusted children frequently manifest problems in more than one syndrome. In order to discover what patterns of syndromic profiles may commonly exist among children, the data for the most recent revision of the BSAG are reanalyzed. The syndrome scores for all 2,527 5- to 15-year-old regular school children in the standardization sample were grouped into similar profile patterns by hierarchical cluster analysis. Sixteen homogeneous syndromic profile types emerged. The resultant profile types were described on the basis of their component behaviors and examined for membership trends by sex and age groups. Multiple syndromic profiles represented 60% of all maladjusted children.

The Bristol Social Adjustment Guides (BSAG) have seen increasing popularity in the British Isles and in North America since the early 1950s. Their reputation has been greatly influenced by their inclusion in the British National Child Development Study involving 15,000 children (see Stott, 1978) and by their normative extension and refinement provided in the most recent standardization version (Stott, 1974) with 2,527 Canadian children. The principal interest
in the guides, however, would seem to relate to the advantages school personnel perceive in using a behaviorally/phenomenologically based child rating scale that draws its items from teachers’ actual descriptions of adjusted versus maladjusted behaviors and that seeks to frame objectively the significance of behavioral styles in the context of school learning and relationships with teachers and peers.

The BSAG contains 110 behavioral indicants of child maladjustment (plus alternative “good adjustment” items) from which teachers select in describing a youngster’s day-to-day coping. These behavioral indicants are clustered into mutually exclusive groups (of items) by way of a “specificity ratio” technique described by Stott, Marston, and Neill (1975). Essentially, this method resembles a sort of nonparametric cluster analysis that groups each item with those other items with which it shares the greatest strength of association by simultaneous incidence. Thus each grouping, referred to as a syndrome, represents a relatively homogeneous cluster of behaviors.

As described by Stott (1971), there are five core syndromes of child maladjustment, i.e., (1) Unforthcomingness (U), which indicates a group of behaviors typified by lack of assertiveness and reluctance to assume an initiating role; (2) Withdrawal (W), an indifference to human affiliation; (3) Depression (D), absence of a normal responsiveness to or search for stimulation; (4) Inconsequence (Q), behavior in lieu of forethought regarding consequences; and (5) Hostility (H), an attack/avoidance behavior style directed to sever ungratifying affiliations with others, principally adults.

In addition to the five core syndromes, Stott et al. (1975) have delineated three associated groupings of malbehaviors distinguished by their tendency to accompany and corroborate maladjustment as measured by the core syndromes. The associated groupings are known as (1) Nonsyndromic underreaction (UR), which denotes behavior frequently manifest along with U, W, and D; (2) Nonsyndromic overreaction (OV), behaviors often accompanying manifest Q or H; and (3) Peer-Maladaptiveness (PM), a set of behaviors that, although they seem to frequently occur along with Q or H, are nevertheless distinct enough to be characterized by poor relations with classmates and other children independent of Q or H. A final clustering of items termed Neurological (N) consists of behaviors suggesting some neurogenic-physical basis for child maladaptation.

The BSAG syndromes and associated groupings have been considered as being subsumed under either one of two general classes of maladjustment, i.e., Underreaction or Overreaction, with the groupings U, W, D, and UR falling under the Underreaction rubric and Q, H, OV, and PM under the Overreaction class. Correspondingly, the scores of the first four item groupings are added to yield a general index of underreactive styles (Unract) and the latter four are combined to render a general index of overreactiveness (Ovract). The overall factorial integrity of Unract and Ovract as well as the specific factorial identity...