

ATTITUDES TOWARD PSYCHOLOGISTS AS REVEALED ON
THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL AS A FUNCTION OF
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

The null hypothesis, that there was no significant difference in attitudes toward psychologists between a high education group and a low education group was tested. The subjects were twenty-five college students and twenty-one factory workers. The Semantic Differential was administered to both of these groups and compared using a t-test. A significant difference was found between the two groups, with the low education group having a more favorable attitude toward psychologists.

Numerous studies have been made which have attempted to determine the status of psychology in regard to public opinion. Much of this research has revealed that the public as a whole places a very high value on professionals as a group (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958). It has been shown, however, that mental health professionals rate less favorably than those professionals dealing with physical disorders (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958). It has also been determined that the public in general does not differentiate between psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, psychologist, clinical psychologist, and research psychologist as far as their attitudes toward them (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958).

The most interesting and disturbing facts in relation to this subject are the findings which indicate that individuals with some college education place lower values on mental health professionals than do individuals with only a high school education (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958). The subjects used for this study were a volunteer population which had been located for use in various scientific inquiries; thus it is possible to cast some doubt on the conclusions which were established. It has been demonstrated that exposure to an academic course in psychology creates a more favorable attitude (Steininger, 1970; Costin & Kerr, 1962).⁹ Indeed, the experience of working in a mental hospital setting causes a favorable attitude change toward psychology (Smith, 1969). As far as an accurate conception

of occupations is concerned; individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds have a clearer picture of professional occupations (Banducci, 1970).

Since college students are more likely to be exposed to a course in psychology, and show less of a tendency to accept false stereotypes (Gilbert, 1951), it appears reasonable to assume that they would place a higher value on mental health professionals than do individuals who have not attended college.

A method for comparing individuals with high and low educational levels in their attitudes toward psychologists was devised which did not utilize volunteer subjects. Since the original study (Nunnally & Kittross, 1958), utilized the Semantic Differential as a measure of attitude toward psychologists, the same scale was chosen for the present study.

The following null hypothesis was tested. There is no significant difference between attitudes toward psychologists, as expressed on the Semantic Differential, between subjects with some college education and those with a high school education.

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects were separated into two groups. Group I was the high education group, which consisted of college students. This group of twenty-five subjects was drawn from an introductory course in music appreciation at Appalachian State University. This course is in the humanities group thus including a broad spectrum of academic interest. Group II was the low education group. The subjects in this

group had a maximum of a twelfth grade education. These twenty-one subjects were factory workers employed by Fabriart Inc., Greenwood, S. C.

Materials. The Semantic Differential as used by Nunnally and Kittross, 1958, was used (Appendix I).

Procedure. Since it was necessary to avoid volunteer participation, the two groups were subjected to a mild form of coercion. In the case of Group I, their professor presented the material and read the instructions (Appendix II). For the factory workers, Group II, their supervisor presented the material and read the instructions. The positions of professor and supervisor are analogous in the sense of the authority afforded to each position. Both groups of subjects were mildly coerced due to the assumed power wielded by the professor or supervisor over their respective group.

There were a few anticipated variables which were not controlled. Such variables as I.Q. and socioeconomic status must be accepted in the definition of the population represented. A previous study (Walker, 1958) indicated that it was not necessary to differentiate between the sexes.

RESULTS

The mean score for each pair of adjectives as computed for Group I was compared to the corresponding pair in Group II. A t-test was utilized and a significance level of .01 was selected. Fifteen of the nineteen pairs showed significant t-ratios (Appendix III). Therefore, the null hypothesis was

rejected. The low education group showed a more favorable attitude toward psychologists. Of the four pairs which showed no statistical significance, two were clearly evaluative: worthless - valuable, ineffective - effective. The results tended to support those of Nunnally and Kittross (Appendix IV).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study have shown a statistically significant difference in the feelings toward psychologists between different segments of the population, thus offering support to the findings of Nunnally and Kittross. It is difficult to determine exactly why this is the case, especially since it is the more educated individuals among us who hold the lower opinion of psychologists. Perhaps more education tends to make an individual more critical in his outlook, and less likely to accept ideas and concepts without a thorough investigation. If this is the cause of the difference, then the educational system could be said to be a major contributor to this fact. This is probably not the case, however, as there are a multitude of variables which in part define the types of individuals who fall within each group studied. As previously mentioned, I.Q. and socioeconomic status are possibly involved in this situation.

The experimenter recommends for future consideration, a study where such variables as I.Q. and socioeconomic status are matched between subjects and the experience of higher education is the only difference between them.

The value of this study and others like it may only be measured by the extent to which their findings are utilized. It is important to note that no matter why there is a distinction between two segments of our population in regard to this question, a distinction does exist. This fact is important in one respect in that it can be used to direct public relations work to the proper group. Anyone who has had the misfortune to closely observe some of today's television commercials must realize that they are directed at select segments of the population. Because of their selectivity they may appear offensive or at the very least stupid when viewed by an individual toward whom they are not directed. In regard to the case in point psychologists or mental health services can now direct their public relations toward the group which has the lowest opinion of them. The appeal of such efforts can be made pertinent to the target population.

A possible criticism of this study and the study of Nunnally and Kittross is the use of the Semantic Differential. This scale measures connotative or metaphorical meanings. Such an exercise requires a great deal of abstraction. Since the ability to abstract is supposedly sharpened with higher education, is it not possible that the high education subjects simply do a better job on their Semantic Differential? If this is the case, then this particular method would be practically valueless when applied to this type of problem.

Appendix II

Instructions.

This is a form used to find out people's feelings about different occupations, in this case psychology. There are nineteen pairs of adjectives with seven blanks between each pair. Put a check in any of these blanks to express your feelings. For example:

Football Player

weak _____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____:_____ strong

Most people would agree that a football player is strong so they would put a check close to the word "strong".

Appendix III

<u>Scale</u>				<u>t-ratio</u>
1.	insincere - sincere-----			3.93*
2.	unpredictable - predictable -----			4.25*
3.	weak - strong -----			4.54*
4.	slow - fast -----			1.57
5.	delicate - rugged -----			2.50*
6.	cold - warm -----			4.40*
7.	dangerous - safe -----			3.87*
8.	tense - relaxed -----			2.95*
9.	worthless - valuable -----			1.85
10.	ineffective - effective -----			1.93
11.	complicated - simple -----			3.57*
12.	colorless - colorful -----			3.90*
13.	undependable - dependable -----			4.07*
14.	feminine - masculine -----			2.56*
15.	excitable - calm -----			4.39*
16.	boring - interesting -----			4.94*
17.	weak willed - strong willed -----			5.17*
18.	emotional - unemotional -----			2.38
19.	twisted - straight -----			7.64*

* significant at or beyond .01 level

note: In every case Group II had the higher mean indicating a more favorable attitude.

Appendix IV

	Scale	Group I Mean	Group II Mean	Mean difference as found by Bradley	Mean difference found by Nunnally and Kittross
1.	insincere- sincere	5.52	6.62	1.10	.15
2.	unpredictable- predictable	4.20	5.86	1.66	.31
3.	weak- strong	4.44	6.05	1.61	.30
4.	slow- fast	4.60	5.29	.69	.78
5.	delicate- rugged	3.92	4.95	1.03	.35
6.	cold- warm	4.36	6.00	1.64	.38
7.	dangerous- safe	4.76	6.10	1.34	.39
8.	tense - relaxed	5.28	6.43	1.15	.53
9.	worthless- valuable	5.40	6.14	.74	.17
10.	ineffective- effective	5.28	6.05	.77	.09
11.	complicated- simple	3.36	5.05	1.69	.62
12.	colorless- colorful	4.72	6.10	1.38	.42
13.	undependable- dependable	5.44	6.52	1.08	.65
14.	feminine - masculine	4.72	5.71	.99	-.22
15.	excitable- calm	5.08	6.48	1.40	.13
16.	boring- interesting	5.00	6.76	1.76	.46
17.	weak willed- strong willed	5.00	6.48	1.48	.38
18.	emotional- unemotional	4.24	5.33	1.09	-.16
19.	twisted- straight	4.36	6.76	2.40	.14

note: A minus sign indicates a higher mean score for the high education group.

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