

INVESTIGATIONS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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Child development has been an interest in the behavioral sciences for quite some time. This interest has, at least in part, been based on the assumed or demonstrated importance of childhood experience on the psychological makeup of adults. Recently, however, there has been somewhat of a shift in the emphasis on the study of child development. In addition to the study of children from the point of view of their relation to what they will become, there has been a more recent concern for children in their own right and their relation to the future children of society. This latter concern, in fact, serves as the basis of the work done in the children's rights movement. There are many signs indicating the viability of this movement, including books,¹ journals,² symposia,³ etc. The visibility of the movement became more apparent in 1979 when that year was declared the International Year of the Child by the United Nations.

At the heart of this new orientation toward the study of children, that is, the consideration of children's rights and attitudes toward them, is a concern with the

procedural aspects of such investigations. With any relatively new area of research, it is important to consider the methodology employed. However, in investigations of attitudes toward children's rights, this consideration is especially important because of the complexity of the phenomenon of interest. With attitudes toward children's rights, the questions are not simply, "What is the effect of X on Y?"—as in many basic experimental situations. In research on attitude, many people would question the notion that "attitudes of X toward Y" is representative of the complexity and scope of the topic.

In order to proceed with some hope of understanding the multivariate aspects of attitudes toward children and their rights, methodology must be of central importance. If such investigations are to be undertaken by behavioral scientists then there must be a methodology that goes beyond a philosophical consideration of the issues surrounding children's rights, since the goal of scientific

investigation is to understand and predict what is going on with respect to children and children's rights. The area of developmental psychology has grappled with methodological issues for many years and most of the issues (e.g., longitudinal vs. cross-sectional) are familiar ones to the behavioral and social scientist. It is, therefore, the investigation of attitudes toward the rights of children that will be the primary focus of this paper.

The notion that a study of behavioral or social phenomena is a study of variance would be a familiar one to most readers. This simply means that one deals with differences among groups and individuals. What is usually not quite so obvious is that one must identify the variables that are the dimensions along which individuals vary. In many areas of investigation, the dimensionality of the domain has already been established before the researcher begins to formulate research hypotheses to guide inquiry. In other domains, attitudes toward the rights of children being an example, the dimensionality has not been established and it is this



consideration which must provide the basis of the early research endeavors.

The basis of the methodology proposed here is found in the procedures of factor analysis. The technique of factor analysis has been a fundamental technique of the behavioral sciences since its first applications by L. L. Thurstone in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the procedure has evolved through several algebraic manifestations to arrive at today's models shaped by computer capabilities, the underlying notions of the factor analytic model remain the same. Basically the procedure involves the clarification of the latent dimensions of variables which account for the correlations among the observed variables. In other words, there are latent variables (psychological dimensions) which are manifested in overt behavior. By systematically sampling

the overt behavior and applying the technique of factor analysis, it is assumed that it is possible to discover the covert psychological dimensions which explain the observed behavior.

In a domain such as children's rights and the attitudes of people toward these rights, the complexity of the behaviors involved dictates that some summarization of these behaviors into a manageable set of dimensions must occur. Several approaches to the summarization of the behaviors in the domain of children's rights are possible. Rogers and Wrightsman designed a structure which classified children's rights into the two broad categories of nurturance and self-determination.⁴ These were each further divided into the domains labeled: education, health, economic, safety, and legal. Items on a questionnaire were then categorized, by the investigators, into the ten

hierarchically-defined domains. The difficulty with such an approach is that the structure underlying the items (the format for the observable behavior) was imposed by the investigators rather than determined by the intercorrelations of the items.

There is a temptation to group items or other forms of behavioral stimuli into categories on the basis of the apparent content. The result is a set of categories or behavioral dimensions which have face validity. However, when the psychological domain is as susceptible to individual and group perceptions as children's rights, a structure defined on the basis of content or face validity would fall far short of the structure necessary to carry on an extended investigation of children's rights. It is quite possible that the



intercorrelations of the items would not support the categorization of the items by experts in the area. When the goal is to develop a sound theoretical base in the domain of children's rights applicable to a wide variety of situations, a structure based on judgment alone could not be considered adequate.

It should be pointed out that the procedure used by Rogers and Wrightsman is a form of factor analysis in that they were attempting to determine the underlying structure of item responses. The problem with this procedure is not in the intended goal of the effort but rather in the criterion by which the categories or dimensions were determined.

The search for the dimensions of children's rights and attitudes toward them has been conducted by several investigators. For the most part, investigators have proposed potential dimensions and then proceeded as if

those dimensions indeed existed. However, only Morton and associates have made a systematic attempt to allow the data, the responses of the subjects, to determine the structure underlying the data.⁵

In order to establish the dimensions of attitudes toward the children's rights, a program of factor analytic studies must be undertaken. The items which would provide the response for analysis have been generated by the efforts of several investigators.⁶ It is important, however, that a more systematic investigation of the interrelationships of these items be undertaken in order to determine the dimensions of attitudes toward children's rights.

In preliminary investigations of attitudes toward children's rights⁷ the value of an objective,

quantitative analysis of responses to items associated with children's rights has been demonstrated. In these studies respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they endorsed the child's point of view presented in a series of items (see the Morton and Dubanoski paper elsewhere in this issue for a more detailed description of the type of questionnaire employed). Although it would be necessary to cover all the studies generated by these investigators to ascertain a complete picture of the programmatic work they have undertaken, only one aspect of their work will be addressed for current purposes. Respondents were instructed to respond four times to each questionnaire item, once each for children's age ranges 0-5, 6-10, 11-14, and 15-17 years. Thus each item generated four scores. For purposes of analysis, two scores were



generated on the basis of the original four per item. One was defined as the sum of the scores for all four age levels, taken to indicate a general "child-orientedness" for the respondent on each item. The second was taken as the difference between the response to the item assuming the oldest referent child (15-17) and the response to the same item assuming the youngest referent child (0-5). This difference was taken as an indication of the change or development in attitude as the child increased in chronological age.

These two sets of scores were then factor analyzed separately to determine the underlying dimensions which would account for the correlations among the raw scores. The important consideration in this case is that two different factor structures with different numbers of factors resulted from the analyses.

The factors resulting from the analysis of the sum scores can be interpreted as the dimensions underlying the attitudes toward children's rights when considering those attitudes independent of the child's age, that is, general attitudes dimensions. On the other hand, the factors underlying the difference scores can be interpreted as defining the dimensions along which attitudes toward children develop as the child grows older. Thus, while certain items may go together when viewed from a cross-sectional perspective, they may not develop or change to the same degree when viewed developmentally. The implications for such a finding are obvious for the development of a theory of children's rights or even a

systemization of the domain of information surrounding children's rights.

Without further validation, the findings just described cannot be taken as determining the dimensionality of the domain. What is clear, however, is that the domain of attitudes toward children's rights is far too complex to be determined via subjective, albeit expert analysis. What is needed instead is systematic observation with objective quantitative analysis of the resulting data. That there could be dimensions not only of attitudes toward children's rights generally but also of change in attitudes toward children's rights with increasing age of the child is an important theoretical consideration. The dimensions of change, however, will have to be replicated under varied conditions



before they can be regarded as valid for purposes of theory construction.

The investigations reported here have, by their nature, avoided certain questions that should also be of central importance in investigations of attitudes toward children's rights. Generally these have to do with whether differences among distinguishable groups should be characterized in terms of differences in structure, that is, the dimensions underlying attitudes toward children's rights, or in terms of their standing on the common dimensions. In other words, are differences among groups qualitative or quantitative. It is reasonable to expect that different cultures with different child rearing practices would have different attitudes toward the rights of children. The

question becomes one of whether the psychological makeup is the same but possessed to differing degrees. Such a theoretical question deserves further empirical considerations.

In the research by Morton and associates, the assumption has been made that the structure of groups defined by culture, sex, age, etc., is the same and that comparisons among groups can be made along the common dimensions. It would seem that such an assumption is testable and the desirability of that test is apparent for adequate theory construction to take place in the domain of children's rights. A logical beginning would seem to be the sampling of separate groups large enough to define separate factor structures for comparison of congruence.

In summary, it is clear that investigations of children's rights and attitudes toward them have become an important area of investigation in the behavioral sciences. That such investigations proceed rationally despite the lack of established dimensionality in the domain is imperative for constructive channeling of efforts. There is no question as to the legitimacy of the domain for inquiry as the implications for educational, social, and legal areas are immense. The question, however, is one of how to proceed methodologically. We believe that establishment of the dimensions of the domain of attitudes toward children's rights generally and developmentally, as well as across defined groups should be a first, common goal of investigators in the area. With the framework of established dimensionality, investigations can proceed in the direction of further theory

construction and application of findings in areas involving children.

Footnotes

- ¹Henning, J.S. (ed.). *Child and the Law. Children's Rights and Children's Attitudes*, Springfield, Illinois: Charles Little, 1980.
- ²Feshback, N.D. and S. Feshback. *Journal of Social Issues*, 1978, 34, No. 2.
- ³Henning, J. (chairman). "Empirical Approaches to Children's Rights," symposium presented at meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.
- ⁴Rogers, C.M. and L.S. Wrightsman. "Attitudes Toward Children's Rights: Nurturance or Self-Determination," in *Journal of Social Issues*, 1978, 34, pp. 59-68.
- ⁵Morton, T.L., R.A. Dubanoski and D.D. Blaine. "Perceptions of the Rights of Children: An Exploratory Investigation," paper presented at meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Diego, 1979.
- ⁶Dubanoski, R.A. and T.L. Morton. "Conceptualization of Child Rights in a Cross-Cultural Context," paper presented at Western Regional meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco, 1978.
- ⁷Morton, et al., *op. cit.*

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