

# COMPARISONS BETWEEN VOLUNTEERS AND NONVOLUNTEERS OF PROJECTED SOCIAL DISTANCES FROM MENTAL PATIENT-RELATED STIMULI

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Along with paid nonprofessionals, volunteers in mental health services are now serving directly therapeutic rather than custodial or other peripheral institutional functions. As the role has changed, so has the composition of the volunteer pool: college students are now a manpower resource for many institutions. The rapid growth of Companion Programs has raised questions about the characteristics of the volunteer.

A recent article by Gruver (1971) reviewing studies of the college student as a therapeutic agent notes clear findings of benefit for the college volunteer himself. Some of these benefits take the form of personality changes in self-esteem, identity issues, and competence. The possibility that students in particular need of improvement in these areas may be the ones motivated to serve is contradicted by the findings of Holzberg, Knapp, and Turner (1967) and Chinsky (1969), who report no significant clinical difference between volunteers and nonvolunteers. The two groups were compared for scholastic aptitude, interests, values, and attitudes toward mental hospital patients and personnel. Volunteers were found to be slightly more religious, morally concerned, compassionate, and interested. They were also more interested in social service (Holzberg et al., 1967).

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college students courageously plunge into the ward and usually are able to make direct long-term contact with even the very severely regressed patients. . . . The fact that there is a reduction of social distance between college students and those seeking help may facilitate the establishment of a working relationship between the therapeutic agent and patient [Gruver, 1971, pp. 112-113].

Although volunteers and nonvolunteers do not differ in verbally expressed attitudes toward mental patients (Adler, Graubert, & Kitay, 1971), such differences may be expressed in nonverbal approach and avoidance behavior.

Kleck, Buck, Goller, London, Pfeiffer, and Vukcevic (1968) report differences between verbally expressed and nonverbally expressed attitudes toward a stigmatized population. Behavior measures supported the predictive accuracy of the nonverbal over the verbal instrument. The present study uses a variation of the Kleck et al. technique to measure projected social distances between volunteer and nonvolunteer students and six mental patient-related stimulus objects. It is hypothesized that volunteers will indicate less distance between themselves and these stimulus objects than will nonvolunteers.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Data were obtained from 179 undergraduates, male and female, attending Adelphi University. The Experimental

group ( $N = 72$ ) was composed of students who responded to a Companion Program enrollment drive on campus via flyers, newspaper, and psychology class announcements. The Ss were mostly sophomore psychology majors. Control Group 1 ( $N = 74$ ) was composed of students from three psychology classes who had been solicited for the Companion Program but who did not enroll. Control Group 2 ( $N = 33$ ) was composed of science or business majors in two mathematics classes. These students were exposed to the general publicity for the Companion Program but were not solicited in class.

### Task and Procedure

A figure-placement task, modeled after Kleck et al. (1968) and Iverson and Adler (1971), was used to measure projected social distance. Colored stickers, 19 mm. (3/4 in.) in diameter, were placed in the center of 21.6 X 28 cm. (8 1/2 X 11 in.) pages of white paper. At the top of the page a brief sentence identified the sticker (e.g., "The sticker below represents your car."). All Ss were given a test booklet of 10 items and an instruction face sheet. Attached to the booklet was a card containing 10 removable stickers of the same type and color, which were identified in the instructions as "your self." Ss were instructed to place the "self" sticker "anywhere on the page." Except for the first two sample items ("car" and "dog"), all items were randomized for order in the test booklets. Ss were instructed not to leaf back or change answers. The task took about 10 min. to complete.

## RESULTS

There were  $t$  test comparisons made for each item between Experimental group and Control Group 1, Experimental group and Control Group 2, and Control Groups 1 and 2.

Stimulus items were divided into three categories: (a) *Sample items*—"car" and "dog" served as practice items. No differences were found between any groups. (b) *Anchor items*—"peer" and "stranger" served as a base for nonexperimental distances. No significant differences were found for "stranger." "Peer" differed at the  $p < .05$  level between the Experimental group and Control Group 2. (c) *Experimental items*—"volunteer" (V), "psychologist" (P), "attendant" (A), "mental patient" (M), "retardate" (R), and "mental hospital" (H).

All items increased significantly in distance from the Experimental group to Control Group 1, from the Experimental group to Control Group 2, and from Control Group 1 to Control Group 2, except for Item V in which the Experimental group did not differ from Control Group 1.

Within the Experimental group, P and M were approximately equidistant with "peer" (see Fig. 1). A

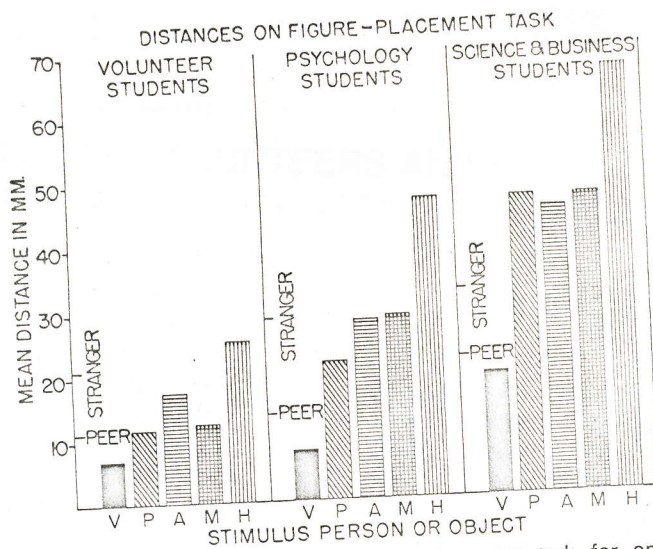


Fig. 1. Mean distances on a figure-placement task for one volunteer and two nonvolunteer groups. (V = volunteer, P = psychologist, A = attendant, M = mental patient, H = mental hospital.)

was about halfway between "peer" and "stranger." Within Control Group 1, M and A were approximately equidistant with "stranger"; P was about halfway between "peer" and "stranger." Within Control Group 2, P, A, and M were all far beyond "stranger." For all groups H was the farthest and V the closest items.

Item "retardate" was omitted from Fig. 1; R was identical with M in the Experimental group, and slightly closer than M in Control Groups 1 and 2.

#### DISCUSSION

The present study found clear support for its hypothesis that the major difference between students who did

volunteer for Companion Programs and those who did not was in the degree of closeness projected between themselves and the mental patient, hospital, and staff. The groups did not differ significantly in the distance projected between themselves and control stimulus objects. It was the students' attitude of closeness to the mental patient and not to the stimuli rather than closeness to stimulus objects in general that distinguished potential volunteer students.

A clear parallel obtained between the work of Kohn et al. (1968) and the present study. In both studies, student behavior appeared to be more closely related to figure-placement scores than to verbal attitude scores, indicating that the figure-placement task was more representative of Ss' behavioral choices than was the test of attitudes.

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