

Results of MPA expt clipped to back

Research Note

Perceptions of Mental Illness  
Among Public School Teachers \*

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*This paper reports the results of a recent study of the perceptions and attitudes about mental illness of 360 teachers in two rural North Carolina counties. Almost all of the teachers perceived something wrong with persons described in four case abstracts (schizophrenia, alcoholism, anxiety depression, "acting out" childhood behavior disorder). Most also thought that the cases were serious. A majority were optimistic about the possibility of a cure. A comparison of the results of this study with others conducted in the 1950s suggests that teachers are better able than the general public to identify symptoms of mental illness.*

IN 1961 THE Joint Commission on Mental Health and Illness recommended wide-spread dissemination of information about mental illness so that the public might recognize psychological forms of sickness and arrive at informed opinions about its responsibility toward the mentally ill.<sup>1</sup> This goal can be accomplished, in part, through the efforts of organizations such as the National Association for Mental Health, the National Institute of Mental Health, and other state and local agencies concerned with problems of mental illness. The educational system is equally important. Because of the universal and compulsory nature of education in the United States, the schools inform and shape popular attitudes toward mental health.<sup>2</sup>

In its day-to-day relations with pupils, the school is represented by the teacher. The teacher plays an instrumental role in the socialization of children, influencing their cognitive and emotional development. Teachers are culture carriers, after all, and function as parental surrogates for the better portion of a child's waking day. Thus the teacher's individual behavior and attitudes regarding what he considers to be behavior problems or incipient mental illness are passed on to the child and influence his beliefs and views of the world about him.

\* This research was supported by Grant No. MH02351-01 from the National Institute of Mental Health.

<sup>1</sup> Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Mental Health, *Action for Mental Health*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1961.

<sup>2</sup> W. Allin Smith and G. W. Goethals, *The Role of Schools in Mental Health*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1962.

state apparatus  
'legitimizes' concept  
that m.i. is an illness  
that requires pro and  
same state apparatus  
financial measurement  
of success of program  
thru publication in  
vocational professional  
journals

The researchers are saying more than they know. For them, as naive supporters of the state, they're saying 'Here's a good way to do a good thing.' For us, as radical inter-  
netars of research findings they're saying = 'Here's the effective method used for propa-  
ganda dissemination of ideology', as well as revealing that they too constitute an  
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(2) Alcoholic

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\* Shirley A. St  
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Because of the importance of the teacher's role in the educational process, a study was conducted of the perceptions and attitudes about mental health of a sample of elementary and secondary school teachers. This paper reports some of the findings.

Description of Sample and Method

In 1968, 396 elementary and secondary school teachers from two rural counties of North Carolina were requested to participate in this study. Questionnaires were left with the teachers at their respective schools, to be completed at their convenience. A total of 360 usable questionnaires (91 per cent) were returned and provide the basic data for the study.

The teacher sample can be described as follows. There are approximately an equal number of whites and non-whites, in age ranging from 20 to 70. There are four times as many females as males. The sample was highly stable in its geographic mobility and in this respect was similar to a random sample of residents from these two counties. During the past ten years 42 per cent had never moved, and an additional 33 per cent had moved less than twice. Forty per cent of these teachers were born and raised in a rural area, while 50 per cent reported that they were brought up in a small town environment. Less than 10 per cent had spent most of their lives in a large city. Fifty per cent of the teachers had lived in the same area for more than 20 years, while an additional 14 per cent had spent from 10 to 20 years in the same area. Only 15 per cent had been in the same area for less than five years.

The teachers were requested to read and answer a series of questions pertaining to four case abstracts. These questions were primarily designed to investigate ability to recognize "something wrong" in the behavior of the person described in the abstract and willingness to label the behavior as mental illness. The abstracts were developed by Shirley Star in a 1950 nationwide survey concerning mental illness.<sup>3</sup>

The case abstracts used in the present study are as follows:

(1) Simple Schizophrenic

First of all, there is this young woman in her twenties . . . let's call her Betty Smith. She has never had a job, and she doesn't seem to want to go and look for one. She is a very quiet girl, she doesn't talk much to anyone—even her own family—and she acts like she is afraid of people, especially young men her own age. She won't go out with anyone, and whenever someone comes to visit her family she stays in her own room until they leave. She just stays by herself and day-dreams all the time and shows no interest in anything or anybody.

(2) Alcoholic

Now about Bill Williams. He never seems to be able to hold a job very long because he drinks so much. Whenever he has money in his pocket he goes on a

<sup>3</sup> Shirley A. Star, "The National Opinion Research Center Study," in *Psychiatry, The Press, and The Public: Problems in Communication*, Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1956.

FALL, 1969

← important for vs. because this measures the effectiveness of the ideological apparatus; effectiveness. If it reaches to here, it reaches everywhere

← ability v. t. willingness

HILLER, University

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TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CASE ABSTRACTS  
(N=360)

|                                 | Schizophrenic   |    |                    | Alcoholic |    |       | Depressed Neurotic |    |       | Acting-Out Child |    |       |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|----|--------------------|-----------|----|-------|--------------------|----|-------|------------------|----|-------|
|                                 | Yes             | No | DK/NA <sup>a</sup> | Yes       | No | DK/NA | Yes                | No | DK/NA | Yes              | No | DK/NA |
|                                 | 1. Knew Someone | 35 | 65                 | 0         | 78 | 22    | 0                  | 59 | 41    | 0                | 59 | 41    |
| 2. Felt Something Wrong         | 94              | 2  | 4                  | 96        | 2  | 2     | 81                 | 6  | 13    | 90               | 5  | 5     |
| 3. Identified as Mental Illness | 78              | 3  | 20                 | 74        | 6  | 20    | 60                 | 7  | 33    | 59               | 13 | 28    |
| 4. Described as Serious         | 61              | 20 | 19                 | 88        | 8  | 4     | 64                 | 25 | 10    | 80               | 14 | 6     |
| 5. Optimistic about a Cure      | 84              | 1  | 15                 | 85        | 5  | 10    | 80                 | 4  | 16    | 83               | 1  | 14    |

<sup>a</sup> "Don't Know/Not Applicable" category includes in the distribution for question 3 respondents answering "No" to question 2, in the distributions for questions 4 and 5 respondents answering "No" to question 2 or 3.

tally ill. The depressed neurotic and the acting-out child were labelled as mentally ill by six of ten teachers.

Of those teachers who identified the case abstracts as mental illness, six of ten felt that both the schizophrenia and the depression cases were serious. In the cases of the alcoholic and the acting-out child, better than 80 per cent perceived these illnesses to be of a serious nature.

Nonetheless, they still felt that the prognosis for a cure was extremely good. In response to the question, "Do you think this mental illness can be cured or not?" 80 to 85 per cent of the teachers felt that a cure was possible. Is there, in fact, a high incidence of optimism among teachers with regard to the treatment of mental illness?

The agencies to which the person would be referred for help, by those teachers who labelled him as mentally ill, are of particular interest. Other studies have suggested that people have strong negative feelings toward mental hospitals and psychiatrists and toward the persons who seek help from these resources.<sup>4</sup> This study provides little or no evidence of negative attitudes toward such resources. Quite the contrary, there appears to have been an attitude of acceptance of medical and psychiatric resources by these teachers (Table 2). In response to the open-ended question of where the respondent would send the person described in the case abstract for help, the

historical change

Sources  
Oscars  
44% mental illness  
in pack

<sup>4</sup>W. G. Klopfer, A. A. Wylie, and J. S. Hillson, "Attitudes Toward Mental Hospitals," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 12 No. 4 (October, 1950), pp. 361-365; G. Sabagh, H. F. Dingman, and C. D. Windle, "Variations in the Image of a Mental Hospital and Situational Bias," *Mental Hygiene*, vol. 47 No. 1 (January, 1963), pp. 96-102; H. G. Watts and J. M. Davis, "Attitudes Toward Psychiatry," *Mental Hygiene*, 44 (March, 1960), pp. 74-78; R. H. Felix, "The Image of the Psychiatrist, Past, Present, and Future," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 12 (October, 1964), pp. 318-322.

TABLE 2  
PER CENT OF HELP RESOURCES MENTIONED TO WHICH RESPONDENTS WOULD REFER THE PERSON DESCRIBED IN THE CASE ABSTRACT

| Help Resource                          | Simple Schizophrenia | Alcoholic | Depressed Neurotic | Acting-Out Child | Total |
|--|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|-------|
| Mental/General Hospital                | 27.2                 | 29.3      | 15.5               | 11.7             | 21.9  |
| Psychiatrist                           | 31.7                 | 13.9      | 32.5               | 29.3             | 25.9  |
| Physician                              | 19.2                 | 13.2      | 18.1               | 11.0             | 15.2  |
| Minister                               | 5.6                  | 9.1       | 14.4               | 5.7              | 8.4   |
| Family/Friends                         | 4.4                  | 1.7       | 2.6                | 10.4             | 4.6   |
| Alcoholics Anonymous                   | ...                  | 25.2      | ...                | ...              | 4.6   |
| Reform School                          | ...                  | ...       | ...                | 3.8              | 0.9   |
| Discipline                             | ...                  | ...       | ...                | 2.2              | 0.5   |
| Other <sup>a</sup>                     | 12.0                 | 7.6       | 17.0               | 25.8             | 14.8  |
| Total Number of Responses <sup>b</sup> | 360                  | 417       | 271                | 317              | 1365  |
| N <sup>c</sup> =                       | 338                  | 346       | 292                | 324              | ...   |

<sup>a</sup> Other includes, psychologist, social worker, counselor, nurse, teacher, self-help, lawyer, etc.

<sup>b</sup> Respondents could give as many help resources for each case abstract as they wished.

<sup>c</sup> Ns are respondents labelling the case as mental illness.

resource mentioned closely by a mental health professional were selected

This finding does not mean that teachers found that teachers identified with generalists identified with psychiatrists

Those teachers who identified with generalists identified with psychiatrists medically related to the helping resource. The case studies are for their care and attention.

One surprising finding would utilize the services is in marked contrast to the 10 per cent of their respondents with a health problem.<sup>6</sup>

A comparison of these studies suggests, for example, that Star's cases as de-

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Rabin and ... Attitudes and Inform ... 1967), pp. 36-41.

<sup>6</sup> G. Gurin, J. Veroff ... Basic Books, 1960.

PERCENTAGE

Type of Case<sup>a</sup>

- Paranoid
- Simple Schizophrenic
- Alcoholic
- Depressed Neurotic
- Disturbed Child
- Compulsive-phobic

N =

<sup>a</sup> Case abstracts developed in each study.

<sup>b</sup> Star.

<sup>c</sup> Cumming and Cumming

<sup>d</sup> Lemkau and Crockett

<sup>e</sup> Dohrenwend, Bernice

<sup>f</sup> Bentz, Edgerton, and Miller

resource mentioned most often was a psychiatrist (25.9 per cent), followed closely by a mental or general hospital (21.9 per cent). Non-psychiatric physicians were selected 15.2 per cent of the time.

This finding does not support the research of Rabin and Suchoski, who found that teachers have more favorable attitudes toward professionals identified with general medicine (i.e. general practitioner) than toward those identified with psychological medicine (psychiatrist).<sup>5</sup>

Those teachers who labelled one or more cases as mental illness mentioned medically related resources about 60 per cent of the time as the most preferred helping resource. Most of the teachers perceived the persons described in the case studies as medically "sick," and they then assigned responsibility for their care and treatment to psychiatrists, physicians, and medical institutions.

One surprising result was the small number of teachers who said they would utilize the services of ministers to help these sick people. This finding is in marked contrast to that of Gurin, Veroff, and Feld, who reported that 42 per cent of their respondents would turn to a minister for help with a mental health problem.<sup>6</sup>

A comparison of the results of the present study with those of previous studies suggests, first, an increasing public ability or willingness to label Star's cases as descriptions of mental illness. As indicated in Table 3: the

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Rabin and Joseph Suchoski, "Teachers' Views of Mental Illness: A Study of Attitudes and Information," *Journal of Teachers of Education*, vol. 18 No. 1 (Spring, 1967), pp. 36-41.

<sup>6</sup> G. Gurin, J. Veroff, and S. Feld, *Americans View Their Mental Health*, New York: Basic Books, 1960.

TABLE 3  
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IN SIX STUDIES LABELLING  
CASE ABSTRACTS AS INDICATING MENTAL ILLNESS

| Type of Case*        | National Study 1950 <sup>b</sup> | Canadian Study 1955 <sup>c</sup> | Baltimore Study 1960 <sup>d</sup> | Urban Leaders 1962 <sup>e</sup> | Rural North Carolina 1968 <sup>f</sup> | Teachers 1968 |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------------|
| Paranoid             | 75                               | 69                               | 91                                | 100                             | ..                                     | ..            |
| Simple Schizophrenic | 34                               | 36                               | 78                                | 72                              | 76                                     | 78            |
| Alcoholic            | 29                               | 25                               | 62                                | 63                              | 69                                     | 74            |
| Depressed Neurotic   | 18                               | 20                               | ..                                | 50                              | 56                                     | 60            |
| Disturbed Child      | 14                               | 4                                | ..                                | 50                              | 50                                     | 59            |
| Compulsive-phobic    | 7                                | 4                                | ..                                | 40                              | ..                                     | ..            |
| N=                   | 3,500                            | 178                              | 1,736                             | 80                              | 1,405                                  | 360           |

\* Case abstracts developed by Shirley Star (NORC survey). Not all abstracts were used in each study.

<sup>b</sup> Star.

<sup>c</sup> Cumming and Cumming.

<sup>d</sup> Lemkau and Crocetti.

<sup>e</sup> Dohrenwend, Bernard, and Kolb.

<sup>f</sup> Bentz, Edgerton, and Kherlopian.

FALL, 1969

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← answers the  
question = who  
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taking business  
away from = (in  
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# 1 "Simple Schizophrenic"

|    | yes          | no           | don't know  | referred |
|----|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------|
| 1* | IIII III 73% | III 27%      |             |          |
| 2* | IIII 37%     | III 27%      | IIII 36%    |          |
| 3* | I 9%         | IIII III 81% | I 10%       |          |
| 4* | IIII 45%     | III 36%      | II 19%      |          |
| 5* | IIII 36%     | 0%           | IIII II 64% |          |
| 6* |              |              |             |          |

nPA  
 nPA  
 as she wanted  
 no where  
 person herself  
 nowhere  
 n/a  
 mPA  
 mPA  
 hospital  
 small groups

# 2 "Alcoholic"

|    |                 |                 |              |
|----|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. | IIII III I 100% | 0%              |              |
| 2. | IIII III 72%    | 0%              | III 28%      |
| 3. | 0%              | IIII III I 100% |              |
| 4. | IIII III 72%    | I 9%            | II 19%       |
| 5. | III 27%         |                 | IIII III 73% |
| 6. |                 |                 |              |

Questions

1. Ever known someone who acted this way?
2. Is something wrong?
3. Is he/she mentally ill?
4. Is it serious?
5. Can it be cured?
6. Where wd you refer person?

don't know  
 A.A. at hospital  
 A.A.  
 A.A.  
 drug centre  
 ?  
 himself friends  
 no where  
 A.A. mPA

### #3 "Depressed Neurotic"

|    | yes       | 100% | no        | don't know | refer |     |
|----|-----------|------|-----------|------------|-------|-----|
| 1. | IIII IIII |      |           |            |       |     |
| 2. | IIII      | 36%  | III       | 27%        | IIII  | 37% |
| 3. | I         | 9%   | IIII IIII | 91%        |       |     |
| 4. | III       | 27%  | IIII      | 36%        | IIII  | 37% |
| 5. | IIII      | 54%  |           |            | IIII  | 46% |

d/k  
 d/k  
 doctor or  
 d/k  
 n/a  
 MPA  
 no where  
 no where  
 his wife  
 friend  
 ?

### #4 "Acting Out child"

|    |         |     |             |      |      |     |
|----|---------|-----|-------------|------|------|-----|
| 1. | IIII II | 63% | IIII        | 37%  |      |     |
| 2. | IIII II | 63% |             |      | IIII | 37% |
| 3. |         | 0%  | IIII IIII I | 100% |      |     |
| 4. | IIII    | 36% | IIII        | 36%  | III  | 28% |
| 5. | IIII    | 54% |             |      | IIII | 46% |

d/k  
 doctor  
 d/k  
 councillor  
 friend  
 d/k  
 parents  
 no where  
 no where  
 d/k  
 n/a