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## Selected Social Psychological Phenomena's Effect on Educational Team Decision Making

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### 1. Introduction

School psychologists practice in complex eco-systemic contexts that present unique challenges and opportunities to impact the education and mental health of children (Borgelt & Conoley, 1999; Curtis & Stollar, 2002; Lusteran, 1992). Social psychology explores human cognition, behavior, and emotion in the context of social interactions (Bernstein & Nash, 2002). This chapter examines the influence of several social psychological phenomena on school psychologists' participation in group decision-making, and presents case examples to illustrate these descriptions. Finally, recommendations for school psychology practice are given to minimize potential negative effects of group decision-making phenomena.

The practice of psychology in the schools presents challenges that are specific to working with teams, systems, and groups. School psychologists must frequently navigate systems' boundaries, conflicting values and beliefs, and multiple roles. Some of these roles include evaluator, counselor, mediator, administrator, consultant, advocate and educator. Each of these roles brings complex issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and multiple relationships when working with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. School psychology can be conceptualized through an eco-systemic framework that presents schools operating as interrelated systems. Each of these systems contains complex interactions between many individuals including parents, teachers, administrators, service professionals and children. These individuals and systems interact and engage in decision making that determine the educational programming for children in the schools. Therefore, understanding group decision-making necessitates an understanding of social influence.

Although social psychology research has been applied broadly to the practice of school psychology (Medway & Cafferty, 1992, 1999), the specific implications for ethics have not yet been addressed. The need to address the ethical decision-making of school psychologists through an understanding of social psychological phenomena is significant because such decisions occur in social contexts. Because ethical decisions are typically made based upon how they will impact others, the application of various social psychological phenomena to ethical decision-making can serve as an appropriate and useful tool. Failing to recognize the influence of social psychological phenomena on group decision making can result in

unintended consequences that can give rise to ethical concerns. What follows are overviews of selected social psychological phenomena that have implications for group decision making and potential ethical concerns, a case example for illustration, and recommendations for best practice.

## 2. The foot-in-the-door phenomenon

The foot-in-the-door phenomenon, also known as sequential-request compliance, predicts that, having complied with a small or initial request, respondents are more likely to comply later with a larger request (Kaufmann-Bryant & Mullen, 1995). For example, after consenting to allow a sales person to enter a home and deliver a demonstration, the homeowner may be more likely to purchase the product being demonstrated. This may result from inferences one might make about compliance with the initial request (e.g., I must be the kind of person that complies with requests because I complied with the last request this person made). Implications of this phenomenon can have significant applications for school psychologists and educational decision makers.

Four decades of support indicate the foot-in-the-door phenomenon clear, yet qualified, base of empirical support. Beginning with the first study related to phone and then in person interviews about household products, (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) more than 100 foot-in-the-door phenomenon experiments have been published (Burger, 1999). Burger's (1999) systematic review and meta-analysis of foot-in-the-phenomenon research carefully delineated the contextual factors that influence compliance. While an extensive discussion of these factors goes beyond the scope of this chapter, a summary of research findings include labeling the participant who agreed to the first request as helpful before making the second request, proximity of the second request to the first and from the same person making the second request that made the first, and making the second request similar to the first. Readers interested in more detailed discussions of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon are referred to more extensive reviews (e.g., Burger, 1999; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984).

Perhaps the impact of foot-in-the-door is most logically considered in the context of informed consent. Informed consent for services is paramount in school psychology. Informed consent is a process rather than an occurrence. "Blanket consent" (in which an individual consents to any and all services that the school psychologist wishes to perform) is inappropriate (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2003). As a result, the school psychologist may engage in sequential requests for each specific type of service that is to be provided. Typically, school psychologists employ a process-oriented approach to informed consent (Pope & Vasquez, 1991), where the school psychologist and parent/guardian revisit issues related to consent issues as proposed services change over time and circumstance. Sometimes, consent is sought for small requests (permission to consult with the child's teacher) and subsequent requests are for more significant services (permission to engage in ongoing counseling with a child). Another common situation for school psychologists occurs when they seek permission to conduct an evaluation of a student suspected of having a disability and then later participates in discussions regarding parental consent for placement in special education services. In this natural course of events, opportunities for the foot-in-the-door type influence should be avoided. The following case example and discussion illustrate the significance of the potential impact of foot-in-the-door phenomenon in school psychology

practice with regard to sequential requests for consent. The case example is not an actual case but reflects an amalgamation of many situations that could occur in school based practice. All names are fictional and do not represent actual people.

### 3. Case example

Bailey Jenkins, the school psychologist, has asked Susan and Dale for their consent to conduct an evaluation to determine if their daughter is a student with a learning disability. Bailey has emphasized that she is seeking consent for evaluation only, and that consenting to the evaluation does not indicate that the parents are agreeing to placement in special education. Susan and Dale agree that there is little risk in giving their consent for the assessment. Bailey shares with the parents that the results of the evaluation indicate that their daughter, Jennifer, meets the eligibility criteria for special education services as a student with Specific Learning Disability in basic reading. Susan and Dale inform Jennifer's teacher and the principal that they will not agree to Jennifer receiving special education services. The principal suggests that Bailey speak to the parents to gain consent as she was able to obtain consent for the evaluation.

This case example illustrates a situation where Bailey, the school psychologist, may unwittingly pressure Jennifer's parents toward consent to placement in special education. Although the primary motivation driving Bailey's attempts to gain the parents' consent may be her belief that the recommendations are in the best interest of the child, the consent for the smaller request for evaluation may influence the parent's willingness to agree to the larger request for placement in special education. This could result in Jennifer's parents making a decision that they might not have made in the absence of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon, thus exercising influence rather than allowing the parents to make an informed decision in the absence of influence.

When a school psychologist has a clear understanding of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon and its implications, she would be cognizant of the issues that arise when the same person asks for consecutive consents. The impact of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon can be minimized if the school psychologist maintains a role of "informer" rather than "persuader". The school psychologist can engage in ethical best practice by providing the parents all the information that they need to arrive at an informed decision and reiterating that their consent for the evaluation should not influence their decisions about consent for services.

Lasser and Klose (2007) suggest the following steps to minimize the impact of foot-in-the-door on decision making in school settings: "a proactive, family empowering approach that utilizes awareness of social psychological principles could involve: discussing with the parents about the importance of making decisions with which they are comfortable; framing parental consent for placement in special education as an option or choice rather than a request for compliance; educating the Individual Educational Plan team to minimize exploitation of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon."

### 4. Conformity

An important aspect of school psychological services is the participation in meetings with other education professionals in an effort to identify and analyze academic, behavioral, and

social problems of students and develop interventions for identified problems. In fact, some aspects of school psychological services must be conducted in group settings according to legal requirements (e.g., IDEIA, 2004 the current federal law that governs special education and related services) that specify required participants (e.g., parents, evaluation personnel, etc.). As a result, an understanding of social psychological phenomena on group decision making is an important component of school psychological services.

Groups can have tremendous social power over individuals and, in some cases, exert pressure on the individual to go against his/her better judgment (Turner, 1995). Conformity has been well studied in numerous social psychology experiments. One of the most well-known of these studies was conducted by Solomon Asch (1952). This study involved the manipulation of subjects' responses to the length of vertical lines. Almost 75% of the subjects conformed at least once in the experiments by giving a response that was consistent with researcher confederates but objectively untrue. Thus, the motivation to conform was more salient than the motivation to be accurate.

Additional studies examined the impact of conformity on decision making processes. By conforming to the opinions of others rather than stating an individual, divergent opinion a group member may minimize stress by avoiding arguing, not appearing to be different or difficult or having to devise a reasonable argument for an unpopular position. People make judgments about those who agree with them and see those who agree as more intelligent and more likeable (Braver et al., 1977). In addition, when one is aware of the opinion of others in advance, one is more likely to conform when expressing his/her individual opinion (Tetlock et al., 1989). Conformity influence has been shown to occur even in situations where individuals feel a high degree of personal importance and/or personal consequences for the group decisions being made (Brief et al., 1991; Brockner et al., 1981).

In contrast, the circumstances that are established for the group decision making process can alter the effect of conformity on individual and group decision making. Chen, Shechter and Chaiken (1996) found that when the group circumstance was established to value "getting along", individuals were more likely to show a conformity effect than when the group decision making circumstance was defined as finding the "truth." In another study, when an individual was called upon to explain or defend his or her view that was divergent from the rest of the group, that individual was more likely to change his/her opinion by conforming with the opinion of the group (Cialdini et al., 1976).

The application of conformity to group decision making in schools is frequently observed when school personnel collaborate to present a "united front" to parents. The case of Jennifer can be expanded to demonstrate this case.

Since Jennifer's parents have expressed that they are not in favor of special education placement, the principal suggests that school staff involved in Jennifer's educational program meet for a "staffing" (a meeting *prior* to the official meeting that typically does not include the parents) to ensure that they are all in agreement with the recommendation that Jennifer be placed in special education. The principal feels that if the school staff iron out any differences or concerns, they can present a "united front" and Jennifer's parents will be more likely to agree with the recommendation.



Unofficial meetings conducted by school personnel that occur prior to an official meeting with a parent, frequently referred to as “staffings”, occur routinely and can include important processes related to a child’s educational program. For example, the staffing can be used to explore alternatives, problem solve, and identify resources, which may be confusing or inappropriate to discuss with parents. However, when educators work to present a united front to parents, they may unwittingly produce results such as those seen in the Asch experiments. When a parent participates in a meeting and hears the same recommendation made by the teacher, the principal, the school psychologist and the counselor, the motivation to conform may influence the parent to agree with the recommendation, even if the recommendation does not represent the parent’s individual preference. Therefore, the pressure to conform may undermine the parent’s right to act autonomously on behalf of his/her child. If school personnel do not share the information that the pre-meeting staffing occurred, the educators may be (wittingly or unwittingly) engaging in deception (such as in Asch’s experiments) to achieve a desired outcome. Such deception creates ethical problems for educational professionals and can result in negative outcomes for the student.

To minimize conformity, school psychologists should encourage team decision making processes that promote truly meaningful discussion among members. Meaningful discussion that values input from all members cannot occur if categorical, predetermined decisions have already been made in advance of the meeting. As mentioned previously, there are aspects of pre-meetings that may be appropriate, but teams should avoid making important decisions about a child’s educational program until all parties are present. By doing this, conformity effects can be minimized. Lasser and Klose (2007, p. 492) suggest that educational planning teams could “formally adopt an approach that honors dissent, promotes a dialectical process, and encourages individual thought.” This approach must be valued and followed by all team members. In addition, it is important that educators follow up with parents following meetings to evaluate their perceptions of their participation in the process. If parents report feeling conformity pressures, the decision making process should be re-evaluated. Finally, if school psychologists learn that parents have felt conformity pressures, they should follow-up to ensure that decisions were made out of conviction rather than social pressure.

## 5. Authority and obedience

Stanley Milgram’s (1963, 1965, 1974) experiments involving administering electric shocks in obedience to authority figures constitute some of the most profound research involving the social psychological constructs of authority and obedience. As a result of the negative effects on subjects and confederates in Milgram’s research new standards were developed regarding the treatment of research participants (e.g., Baumrind, 1964 and Ableson, Frey, & Gregg, 2004) and, consequently, Milgram’s studies have not been replicated. However, similar studies have also shown obedience to authority, such as in the area of nursing (Hofling et al., 1966) and studies similar to the Milgram experiments in countries other than the United States (e.g., Kilham & Mann, 1974; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1995). In addition, the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) demonstrated the importance of social roles in authority and obedience.

Because students and their parents may perceive school personnel as authority figures, care must be taken to ensure that decisions are not made under the influence of obedience to authority and are instead based on careful consideration of information. However, as the continued expansion of Jennifer's case illustrates, authority and obedience dynamics can come into play not only between parents and school staff, but also within school system hierarchies.

When the principal presented her ideas about the pre-meeting staffing to present a united front to Jennifer's parents, Bailey, the school psychologist and Mr. Suarez, Jennifer's classroom teacher, expressed concerns. The principal informed Bailey and Mr. Suarez that participating in the staffing was mandatory and not participating would be considered insubordination and be reflected in their annual performance reviews.

The school principal's leadership role includes the supervision and evaluation of all school personnel. As a result, there are many circumstances in which deference to this authority might be expected and appropriate. However, when making important decisions regarding the educational programming for an individual student, especially one who is being considered for special education, is not one of these instances. In this type of instance, a multi-disciplinary team should make a decision that is based on data and thoughtfully considers information from all team participants. Further, failure to make sound decisions in an effort to comply with the command of authority figures potentially violates ethical and legal standards.

The problem posed in the case example is common and challenging. Bailey and Mr. Suarez's non-compliance with the principal's plans could lead to a poor performance evaluation and possibly dismissal. However, the educational decision making team has an obligation to the child to engage in an appropriate and data-based decision making process regarding the child's educational program.

In addition to the situation described in the case example, educators need to take steps to manage the impact of authority influence in group decision making. Lasser and Klose (2007, p. 493) make the following recommendations:

"First, team members could be designated specific roles and responsibilities that could functionally reduce any given member's authority over the group. For example, the principal could be assigned the role of parent liaison, the school psychologist the role of note taker, the general education teacher the role of data presenter. By diffusing the responsibility and functions across team members, the team may effectively transfer some authority associated with one individual across the team. Another improvement to the general education problem solving teams that could potentially deemphasize authority could be the development of a team mission statement and ground rules that explicitly emphasize shared governance and democratic process. Such a statement could be posted on the conference room wall where the meetings are held and/or reviewed before each meeting. Efforts to undermine such a process would be difficult to reconcile in the face of a public commitment to free thought and speech."

Another technique to minimize power differentials and lessen the impact of authority influence is the practice of "one-downsmanship" (Caplan & Caplan, 1993). This allows decision making team members to collaborate in a decision making process that emphasizes an egalitarian approach.

## 6. Fear appeals

Most of the research on the impact of fear appeals is related to advertising campaigns. However, some empirical data is available that examines the impact of fear appeals on personal decision making (Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Lerner & Keltner 2000). When fear appeals are employed, individuals tend to make decisions that they perceive will avoid unpleasant outcomes rather than effectively solve problems. This can result in denial of responsibility for the decision (Keller & Block, 1996) and avoidance of making a decision (Dubachek, 2005). However, fear appeals may also be used to highlight specific aspects of a particular situation (Frijda, 1986). For example, advertisements may predict or imply dire consequences for not using the product being shown. In summary, fear appeals may be used to emphasize the seriousness of a particular situation, however, fear appeals may also negatively impact the group decision-making process.

While additional research is needed into the impact of fear appeals on group decision making, available information can be applied to the context of educational decision-making. For example, a suggestion that a certain decision will result in negative outcomes for a child is likely to influence a parent's decision making process.

When the disadvantages of a course of action are emphasized to influence outcomes with the intent of arousing anxiety, the fear appeal phenomenon is at work (Manstead, 1995). While it is true that educational decision making groups should consider potential positive and negative outcomes when evaluating alternatives, a fear appeal occurs when communication between group members is specifically designed to instill anxiety in specific group members. Parents may be particularly vulnerable to fear appeals in the context of making educational decisions regarding their child. Parents may have negative school experiences that make participating in any educational decision making an anxiety provoking experience. Jennifer's case example is further detailed to examine the impact of fear appeals.

When Jennifer's parents attend the team meeting where Jennifer's evaluation results are discussed and plans are going to be made, they enter the room with trepidation. Jennifer's father had difficulty learning to read and as a result was retained in third grade and this led to a great deal of subsequent difficulties in school. During the course of the meeting, in addition to the recommendation for Jennifer to be placed in special education, the teacher mentions that if Jennifer is not placed in special education, she is likely to be retained as her performance is not on grade level.

In this situation, the teacher uses the unpleasant outcome of grade retention in an attempt to influence Jennifer's parents in giving their consent for special education placement. Roger's (1983) protection motivation theory proposes that fear appeals have the most influence on behavior when the individuals see the problem as a serious problem, the individuals are vulnerable to the problem and the individuals can do something about the problem. In the case example, Jennifer's parents are concerned about her difficulties in school and presumably feel that this a significant problem in that these difficulties could influence her academic progress in later years. Jennifer is certainly vulnerable to the negative consequences that can be associated with retention in a grade. Jennifer's parents are being told that they can do something about the problem and avoid the negative outcome of grade retention by agreeing to placement in special education. Consequently, Jennifer's parents



may be influenced to consent to special education services, in spite of their original objections. Lasser and Klose (2007, p. 496) suggest that “the school psychologist has a responsibility to explain the impact of fear appeals to administrators and other educational professionals to ensure that school personnel do not exploit the fears and anxieties of parents.”

## 7. Informational influence

Informational influence occurs when a member of a group influences the decisions of a group by presenting him/her self as an undisputed expert (Turner, 1995). Members of the group are influenced because the expert is viewed as having the most valid and most important contribution to the group. As a result, the group may be more likely to make a decision that is recommended by the expert, rather than arrived at by the entire group. Members of a group are influenced to agree with the information presented by the expert in order to appear attractive/intelligent to the rest of the group and thereby obtain social approval. This type of influence increases as the uncertainty of individual group members increases.

Burnstein and Vinokur (1973, 1975) demonstrated shifts in group decisions based on informational persuasions and when compared to the influence of conformity, informational influence has been shown to yield “more frequent and stronger shifts” in groups’ decision outcomes (Kaplan & Miller, 1987, p. 306). Other studies have examined other variables such as the type of issue discussed by a group (e.g., intellectual vs. judgmental) (Laughlin & Earley, 1982) and the types of decision rules needed for action (e.g., unanimous vs. majority) (Miller, 1985). Kaplan and Miller (1987) demonstrated that intellectual decisions under a unanimous decision rule were most susceptible to informational influence.

In an educational group decision making team meeting, each member brings information and areas of expertise. These areas can overlap as all team members are involved in the education of a particular child being discussed. The multidisciplinary team is involved in developing the educational plan for a student because each member of the team contributes valuable information toward the development of the plan. Jennifer’s case example continues with an illustration of informational influence.

The first meeting of the decision making team involved with Jennifer’s educational program did not result in a final decision as to how to progress. Jennifer’s parents decided to consult a private educational psychologist for a second opinion regarding Jennifer’s learning needs and profile. Dr. Frankle attended the second team meeting and presented his findings. He reported that his assessment did not indicate that Jennifer was a child with a learning disability and he cited his years in private practice and the number of his clients as evidence of his authority to make such a claim. Further, Dr. Frankle recommended that a specific reading program be utilized in the regular classroom to maximize Jennifer’s probability of success in reading.

Jennifer’s parents have a right to seek a second opinion regarding their daughter and to invite others to participate in decision making teams. However, school psychologists should be cognizant of the ways in which Dr. Frankle’s status could potentially override other team members’ contributions, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Consequently, the school

psychologist should make efforts to ensure that Dr. Frankle's influence is not given more weight than other team members.

Encouraging and validating each group members contribution is an important way to minimize informational influence. If the group appears to be experiencing informational influence, the school psychologist can use group facilitation skills to ensure that each member is able to contribute.

Parents may be vulnerable to more subtle forms of informational influence in that they may feel that they have less to offer in an educational decision making because the school personnel are the experts in education, and this uncertainty may result in an increase of vulnerability to informational influence (Turner, 1995). As a result, parents may agree in an effort to appear socially acceptable and cooperative instead of asserting their own expertise related to their child. By being aware of this phenomenon, the school psychologist can encourage parents by soliciting contributions and framing information so that other team members understand the relevance of the parent information.

## 8. Recommendations

The case example illustrated how a variety of social psychological phenomena can potentially influence the outcomes of important educational decisions. Lasser and Klose (2007, 497-8page) offer the following recommendations to minimize the unwanted consequences of impact of these social psychological phenomena on educational group decision making:

1. Maintain "dual citizenship" as a member of decision-making groups and as an outsider that is "meta the group." In doing so, school psychologists can actively participate as team members but have the added advantage of stepping outside of the group to better observe and understand its processes. While this may be challenging, it is certainly not unusual for school psychologists to work in multiple roles that transcend systems. Just as a social constructivist can step back to critique a system in which he/she lives, so can the school psychologist simultaneously work in a system and cognitively remove himself/herself to monitor the process.
2. Promote independent thought among team members. This effort could be supported by solicitation of individual input prior to group meetings. Ultimately, this serves children and adolescents because decisions are made in consideration of them rather than as a response to social pressures.
3. Teach teachers and administrators about the impact of social psychological phenomena to reduce the use of inappropriate behaviors (e.g., fear appeals).
4. Work collaboratively to decrease perceived power differentials. Any effort to reduce perceptions that team members must obey authority figures will promote meaningful involvement from all team members. This can be accomplished through Caplan and Caplan's (1993) *one-downsmanship*, which emphasizes the coordinate status of personnel, deemphasizes hierarchical relationships, and actively counters deference.
5. When social psychological phenomena are interfering with sound decision-making, bring the concern to the attention of the group. Teams can identify the problem and take steps to correct it.

## 9. Conclusion

While social psychological phenomena will always be a part of school psychologists' work, the problems associated with these factors need not be problematic or pervasive. With greater awareness and proactive approaches, school psychologists may be better able to improve the functioning of educational decision-making groups and better understand the social world of schools. Future research should include investigations of the extent to which practicing school psychologists are aware of the social psychological phenomena occurring in their daily practice. This research could utilize questions about vignettes that describe the various phenomena. In addition, the level of knowledge regarding social psychological phenomena in general should be assessed. Perhaps revisions of entry level qualification exams should be revised to include this content. An important extensive of research in this domain is the evaluation of parents perceptions of the impact of social psychological phenomena their own decision making regarding their own child. Data from these types of studies would provide important information for trainers of school psychologists to use in the preparation of future practitioners.

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