
Classic article from 1980

Research, Empiricism, and the Principle of Normalization**

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Some general background considerations

As is to be expected, a frequently asked question is: What research exists in support of the normalization principle? To begin, this question cannot easily be answered in a global fashion because the principle of normalization is not monolithic, but has a vast number of components, corollaries, and action implications that fall into a hierarchy of levels. It is only to be expected that not all would have the same amount or quality of research support. The principle of normalization also subsumes elements and corollaries that not only vary in their amount of value-ladenness, but also as to their level of systemicness. Thus, those corollaries or implications that are simultaneously more clinical and less value assumption-laden are much more accessible to research, with research becoming more difficult and at least to some extent "trans-empirical" (if not fully nonempirical) as the combined societal and value-laden domains are approached. However, it is noteworthy that, at least in some ways, the less concrete claims and implications of normalization, and even the value-based ones, can be subjected to at least some types of empirical inquiry.

One way to relate normalization issues to research is to look at the ratings in the PASS tool (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1975a, 1975b), which breaks normalization into 34 hierarchically arranged ratings and which also includes 16 other ratings, some of which have some normalization relevance. The 34 ratings that are fully based on normalization are grouped into integration (14 ratings), age- and culture-appropriate interpretations and structures (12 ratings), developmental growth orientation (3 ratings), quality of setting (4 ratings), and model coherency (1 rating).

To give an example of how normalization, or related, issues can fall into a hierarchy of researchability, one might say that the assertion that "devalued people should be encouraged and assisted to use services

and resources available to all citizens" would probably be "trans-empirical," i.e., reflect theorems based on lawful processes which, however, may not be fully researchable because of their complexity. More clearly in the empirical realm would be assertions such as these: that habilitation is enhanced by the presence of a continuum of services, that adults who are treated like adults are more apt to act like adults, and that more socially valued behavior will be emitted by persons who live in a beautified environment.

Another major issue is that, as should be clear to someone who has seriously studied the Wolfensberger normalization formulation (especially as explicated in PASS), research relevant to normalization will almost certainly not be found under any normalization topic, heading, or cross-referent or search file. Thus, many people who have asked me about the research base of normalization have been very disappointed when I informed them that the bulk of the supporting evidence must be sought out in a vast array of fields and topics. For instance, considerable evidence bearing on the integration corollary of normalization would be found in the literature on social distance. Much research has been conducted in any number of areas and fields with regard to role expectancies, role demands, and role circularities. These have relevance to almost any application of the normalization principle. For research bearing on the wide array of normalization implications having to do with social image, image transfer, deviancy image juxtaposition, image enhancement, and social role stereotype, one must search the vast literature on attitudes toward devalued groups, prejudicial stereotyping, attitude and value formation, and persuasion. In fact, the literature concerned with advertising and marketing techniques and with subliminal perception has tremendous relevance to the image transfer issues.

It is not too likely that many individuals have knowledge of all the many areas of research that have implications to the principle of normalization. Not only are there numerous areas involved, but the

evidence would be scattered in the journals of many professions as well. Thus, it is almost necessary to examine one or a few of the normalization corollaries or implications at a time across a wide spectrum of literature in order to be able to compile all the relevant empirical results.

One of the misconceptions about the principle of normalization is that it is "unproven" and "lacks research evidence" (Wolfensberger, 1983). Such claims are contained in the writings of Mesibov (1976a, 1976b) and of Zigler (1977) who referred to normalization and deinstitutionalization in a way as to suggest their equivalency, and then called both of them "little more than slogans that are badly in need of an empirical data base."

So far, no one has conducted a detailed analysis of the implications of normalization in terms of a taxonomy, or an hierarchy of generality. (This would make an excellent thesis.) However, even cursory examination would reveal that despite the ideological origin of the principle of normalization, there really are not many implications that are not empirically verifiable at least in theory, though some approach the trans-empirical level in requiring research of a scope that would not likely be conductable. But this would probably only affect some of those normalization implications that have to do with long-term societal attitude formation and change. In contrast, the more clinical-personal normalization implications are not only readily accessible to research, but have already been researched, and usually are quite well supported. This is certainly contrary to the claims of Mesibov and Zigler, if they indeed were referring to normalization as defined in our rather rigorous theoretical framework. Unfortunately, they may only have reacted to a slogan, or to perversions of normalization, as do so many critics. Also, they may have fallen into the very common trap of only looking for extremely narrowly applicable literature, such as "mainstreaming" of retarded children, rather than at the very broad literature that has to do with the inclusion and the exclusion, that is, the integration and the segregation, of devalued people in general.

Selected examples of empirical support for normalization principles from the literature

The fact that a vast amount of literature can be relevant to the issue of normalization, without even mentioning the word, was dramatically borne out by the April 1978 issue of *Mental Retardation* (a journal of the American Association on Mental

Deficiency). In this issue, at least five research reports had distinct relevance to normalization implications, while only one of these as much as mentioned the word, or cited any normalization references. Of perhaps the greatest importance of all the items in this journal issue, and highly revealing of the dynamics of mental retardation, was an article by Mulhern and Bullard (1978). Mulhern and Bullard asked undergraduate anthropology students and staff members of an assessment unit of a regional center for the mentally retarded to specify what they would do if they wished to appear to other observers to be mentally retarded. Interestingly, the responses tended to fall into three broad categories, namely those indicating a) some type of impairment in communication, 2) peculiar overt behavior, and 3) passiveness, or lack of energy, initiative, or self-direction. Again, these results have bearings on a number of PASS ratings that eventually relate to the public perception of devalued people, personal appearance, and role expectancies and role circularities.

Many other studies from the mental retardation literature are relevant, although the findings seem to be largely applicable to other devalued groups as well.

In order to illustrate how a single study can have a large number of implications to various normalization issues, even though the study may have been conducted without any mention, or even awareness, of normalization principles, a report by Hayes and Sider (1977) is reviewed in depth. (I am indebted to Susan Thomas for much of this review.) Using a projective testing technique, Hayes and Siders compared groups of mildly retarded and nonretarded children on the distances they placed between a graphic figure that presumably represented themselves (the self-figure), and various figures presumably representative of other persons and/or roles. The "other figure" was interpreted to the children at various times during the test as having positive, neutral, or negative characteristics, and as being smart, not smart, or a teacher. As the other figure was attributed at different times with the above-listed characteristics, the children were asked to place the figure that represented themselves in whatever distance relation (e.g., close to, far away, neither close nor far) they liked to the other figure. Thus, the physical distance placed between a child's self-figure and his/her other figures was assumed to indicate the psychological distance that a child felt from the various other people represented by the figures; i.e., the closer the two figures were placed, the closer the psychological distance the children presumably felt

to the other figures. The children in this study were of both sexes, both Negroid and Caucasoid, and were matched as much as possible on mental age.

Hayes and Siders predicted, and confirmed that, for all children, the distances between the self-figure and a positive figure would be smallest (representing the most psychological closeness); would be larger between the self-figure and a neutral figure; and would be largest between the self-figure and a negative figure (representing least psychological closeness). Since in classes for retarded children, one usually finds a) a smaller number of students, 2) a greater prevalence on individualized instruction, and 3) a greater attention to reinforcement of successful performance, Hayes and Siders further predicted, and confirmed, that the distance between a self-figure and a teacher figure would be less for retarded children than for nonretarded children. No prediction was made concerning the children's relation to a smart and a not-smart figure; however, both groups of children placed greater distance between the self-figure and the not-smart figure than between the self-figure and the smart one.

The reported results have universal implications to several important areas in the (re-)integration of handicapped and devalued persons into society. First, although Hayes and Siders did not note it, the results support the normalization corollary that if one wishes to facilitate social integration of devalued people, it is important to associate them with positive and valued images. The physical distances, that the children placed between the self-figure and various other figures are further evidence that the more a person is seen in a positive social light, the more likely it is that others will seek his/her company. Thus, when devalued people are served in valued settings, where familiar and valued methods are used, and together with other valued people (i.e., associated with positive images), their social desirability in the eyes of others (i.e., the potential assimilators) will be increased.

The findings also imply that the development of highly valued personal traits, such as courtesy, friendliness, generosity, hospitality, sociability, and attractive appearance, in devalued persons is extremely important in moving them toward acceptance by members of society, and therefore toward their integration into the community. This conclusion is supported by the fact that both retarded and nonretarded children placed the self-figure closer to the "nice" figure than either to the smart figure or to the other less valued (e.g., not-smart,

negative) figures. Apparently, if devalued persons are seen in a highly positive light, other people will make greater allowance for their negatively valued attributions (in this case, low intelligence). The positive associations will begin to compensate for, or balance off, the negative ones. This finding supports the "conservatism corollary" of the normalization principle, which states that it is not enough for a service to be merely neutral in neither diminishing nor enhancing the image of devalued persons to the larger society, but that it must strive for the most positive images that can realistically be attained. Of further relevance to this issue was that the distances chosen by the nonretarded group between the self-figure and the neutral figure, and between the self-figure and the not-smart figure, were practically identical, even though these distances were significantly closer than that between the self-figure and the negative figure. This means that if one wants valued people to identify closely with devalued ones, it is not enough for people to form neutral mental associations to devalued people; these associations must be definitely positive ones.

The Hayes and Siders study once more confirms the established universal that people respond positively to positively valued behaviors and traits. This was as true of the retarded participants of the study as it was of the nonretarded ones. Therefore, it can be expected that retarded and otherwise devalued persons would be attracted to persons who exhibit positively valued behaviors (e.g., friendliness, "niceness"). Since people learn a great deal from those with whom they interact, it is more likely that devalued persons will learn more positive behaviors if they associate with valued persons (i.e., people who have and/or display such characteristics), than if they are isolated from, or denied access to, such valued persons. The findings thus reinforce the tremendous potential of positive peer modeling and interactions and their importance in the integration of devalued persons.

One final important finding of the study concerns the shorter distance that retarded children placed between the self-figure and the teacher figure, in contrast to the nonretarded children. The authors interpret this result as being due to the closer personal contact that exists between retarded children and their teachers than is the usual case in classrooms for typical children. This closer contact could be due to the smaller classes, more individualized teaching methods, and therefore greater quantity of personal teacher-student contact

in special classes, as Hayes and Siders suggest. It could also be due to the expectations of many special educators that retarded children need an extraordinary amount of affection in order to learn—or even that they need affection more than learning. One can draw the universal implication that the expectations of service staff have a profound effect on the shaping of the service structure. Knowledge of this universal can be used to enhance the status of devalued persons, and thereby their potential for social integration, by ensuring that staff hold high and demanding expectations for the devalued persons with whom they work and that staff model appropriate and valued habits and skills to their clients, thus conveying a positive public image. Conversely, staff who hold very low expectations, and who provide negative models, may diminish the image of devalued people, and thereby reduce even further the potential for their social integration.

An article by Thompson (1978) addressed the cooperative relationships among retarded, and between retarded and nonretarded, individuals. This issue is strongly related to questions of equality and societal participation, which, in turn, is captured in the normalization-related PASS rating of "Interactions."

Somewhat relatedly, a study by Chennault (1967) indicated that it is possible to improve the social acceptance of unpopular retarded pupils within their respective special classes. The two least popular pupils worked with the two most popular pupils in producing a skit. In this situation, the four members of the group had a common goal and depended upon each other in order to attain it. Chennault reported that the social position of the least popular pupils improved significantly, results quite consistent with the normalization theory corollary of image transfer.

Warren and McIntosh (1970) confirmed the rather obvious fact that even handicapped children generally were more attracted to their more competent peers. This finding supports the normalization implication that it is important not only to enhance competency, but also to enhance the image of competency.

The significant concern of the normalization principle with the importance of age- and culture-appropriate appearance of persons seems to have a very solid foundation in the literature. Neisworth, Jones, and Smith (1978) have extensively documented the adverse effects upon a person's life of such culturally-devalued characteristics as physical deformity, body build, obesity, and the obvious presence of prosthetic devices. The importance of

various types of culturally valued behaviors was also stressed by the citation of studies documenting the negative impact upon a person who displays devalued personality traits and disruptive behavior. Various types of behavior patterns that deviate negatively from the norm and that have adverse impact upon the person include not merely low intelligence, but also reduced social contact with members of the opposite sex, having fewer and less intensive friendships, poor teacher expectancies, and negative interactions between the pupil and teacher. Many if not most of the negative impacts are mediated by social expectancies and role circularities—processes that are at the heart of a large number of normalization issues. Neisworth, Jones, and Smith have sketched one model that contributes to the understanding of such role circularities.

English (1971) has also summarized a great deal of material that points to the difficulty people with obvious stigmata have in being integrated and assimilated. He then spelled out ten implications to attitude change, many of which would coincide with normalization implications. In general, his article has considerable bearing on the normalization issues of age- and culture-appropriate personal appearance.

An interesting data-based study of clothing selection for retarded women was conducted by Nutter and Reid (1978). Without mentioning normalization, the study provided both empirical and theoretical support for the normalization issues of culture-appropriate personal appearance and for the conservatism corollary of the principle of normalization.

An article by Staugaitis (1978) on weight control for retarded people in certainly most relevant to the important issues of "Culture-appropriate Personal Appearance" and of health advocacy ("Autonomy and Rights"), both being normalization-derived issues in PASS.

Rago, Parker, and Cleland (1978) found that aggressive behavior of profoundly retarded male adults was significantly reduced when they were provided with less crowded environments. Such a finding is certainly consistent with the normalization dimensions of individualization and comfort as assessed in PASS, and possibly other PASS ratings (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973a, 1973b, 1975a, 1975b).

A similar study was conducted by Glenn, Nerbonne, and Tolhurst (1978) who found that the noise level in institutional settings tended to be remarkably high,

and that in less noisy environments residents were much more able to understand what was being said to them—the fancy expression for this being “word intelligibility by perception identification.”

Tognoli, Hamad and Carpenter (1978) measured the behaviors of retarded adults in a deprived ward and in an enriched ward of an institution and found that the behavior in the enriched ward was more active, more social, and more constructive. Clearly, these findings are supportive of the rationales underlying several of the normalization ratings on PASS, i.e., those that have to do with “Culture-appropriate Environmental Design,” “Environmental Comfort,” “Environmental Beauty,” and “Intensity of Relevant Programming.”

A number of studies in the area of alcoholism might be cited as relevant to various expressions of the normalization principle, even though this was not explicated in the studies themselves. For instance, the normalization implication covered under the PASS rating of interactions seems to be supported in the study by Leake and King (1977) that emphasized the importance of culturally normative nonstigmatizing staff and client interactions in improving client outcomes. The normalization/PASS issue on intensity of relevant programming appears to have received support from a Rand Report on alcoholism treatment (Armor, Polich, & Stambul, 1976) that showed the importance of services to be provided in a sufficient “dosage” of duration, as apparently also brought out in the study by Bromet, Moos, Bliss, and Wuthmann (1977).

One could go on citing studies such as the above literally by the thousands. How many people would, as a result, become more or less committed to the implementation of normalization principles?

How much research is enough?

Ultimately, the most important issues in human services (as in life, politics, economics, religion, etc.) have not been, are not, and never will be decided on the basis of “research,” or even on the basis of empiricism and evidence. They will be settled on the place of values and ideologies, or even of passion. In fact, ideology controls what kind of research does and does not get conducted, or what research is even possible to conduct, allowed, or funded. That such an empirically self-evident fact is not obvious to everyone leaves me puzzled.

One of the biggest shortcomings in scientific training is the lack of training regarding the limitations of science; and in the socio-behavioral field, it is the lack of training in empiricism, as contrasted to “research.”

A few illustrations of the failure of human service workers to recognize the role of ideology in research, with special reference to normalization, are given below. For instance, Edgerton, Eyman and Silverstein (1975) referred to normalization, deplored the lack of “scientific evidence to tell us what it is about a small community hostel that is superior,” and stated that “research relating to the alternative residential and service systems called for by normalization has only recently begun in earnest, and the results are still partial and inconclusive.” “Speaking as scientists, we are uneasy that so many changes have been based on so few scientific data.”

Why is it that there has been so little research on community residences? One obvious reason is that they are new and for over a hundred years, ideology has dictated that there be nothing to study. At the same time, why were there no studies in a hundred years on the “effectiveness” of institutions? Because ideology dictated that there would be institutions, and nothing else.

And now, what is there to study about community residences? Is it really necessary for Glenn, Nerbonne, and Tolhurst (1978) to expend time and money on proving that in less crowded and noisy environments, people can hear better what is said? Is it really necessary for Rago, Parker, and Cleland (1978) to waste our money by showing that profoundly retarded people act better when they are not crowded? Good grief! What does such research really prove? That its authors were not sure that handicapped people are human? Have feelings? Can change? It is indeed a rather sad commentary that one would find it necessary to conduct a study of an aspect of living that is phenomenologically obvious to the nondevalued members of our culture. Studies such as these make it clear that some of the criticism directed against the normalization principle is profoundly ideological, rather than empirical, in nature and would require the verification of the transfer, applicability, and validity of the experiences of valued citizens to every group of devalued people, as if such devalued people were representatives of a different species. Strangely enough, even a vast number of things that human beings desire have been well established to enhance the welfare of all sorts of animal species, and thus require little or no

further validation. Thus, by implication, some devalued groups of citizens appear to be perceived as functioning outside and below the range of some animal species.

How much "research," or additional research, should be conducted to support normalization implications for attractive environments; reasonably convenient access to services; age-appropriate and culturally valued forms of personal appearance, labeling, activities, and environmental decor; individualization and intensiveness of programming; avoidance of crowding; competent and image-enhancing staff; warmth of interaction among people; attachment of positive social imagery to devalued people; allowing people to take as much risk as they are capable of coping with; and on and on. These are all prominent normalization implications, and people who want those "proven" or validated will not likely be convinced by evidence anyway.

Even the very results of research, especially in the socio-behavioral research culture, must be viewed with deepest skepticism, no matter what is found. For instance, if researchers do not like a group of people who are the object of research, the results have a higher likelihood of showing the subjects in a poor light, and vice versa. Thus, in order to interpret research, one almost needs to know the ideology of the researcher. Furthermore, the more ideology-laden and emotional the issues are that are studied, the less likely is it that the results are truly objectively derived and interpreted. One possible example is a series of reports from a research project on residential adjustment of retarded adults (e.g., Birenbaum & Re, 1979; Birenbaum & Seiffer, 1976). The reports indicate that the project studied adults who had moved from "institutions" to "community residences" and proceed to draw all sorts of conclusions regarding the principle of normalization. Yet when the ideological language barrier is broken, it is found that the people being studied had actually moved from one kind of institution to another. Strangely enough, many of the findings may still be valid, although their interpretations may not be.

So what is one to believe even when one does find what looks like a solid research design? Failure to teach what I call the "limitations of research," and of the research culture, is one of the most obvious signs of the bankruptcy of the research culture.

In consideration of the above, we can return to Zigler's (1977) reference to the lack of data about normalization. His failure to recognize the dominance of ideology was illustrated in his own equating of removal of a child from a family with

placement in an institution. We had to break through an ideological, not an empirical, barrier to recognize that one does not imply the other. This inability to recognize the ideological issues is further underlined in Zigler's article when he makes statements such as "only research can provide an answer," when talking of all sorts of manipulations to which retarded people are subjected for ideological rather than empirical reasons. While it is certainly possible to compare the outcomes of different ideologies, at least in theory, it is totally impossible to design research if one is not aware of the operation of ideologies, since then one cannot even ask the right questions. Once more, this is illustrated when Zigler says that only data can resolve the benefits of deinstitutionalization when, until recently, ideological suppression of noninstitutional services had made this very research question an impossible one to even address.

Critics such as Mesibov and Zigler also make that classic and quite probably unconscious mistake of pointing, on a number of occasions, to the lack of research support for implications that might conceivably flow from the normalization principle, without calling with equal rigor for research support for other (competing) practices, many of which are derived from ideology more than empiricism, and some of which are in fact totally opposed to what empirical data do exist.

The bulk of human service operates in ideological defiance of empiricism. This includes much of our welfare, correction, juvenile justice, and mental health systems. It includes much of the practice in mental retardation, which generally has not incorporated the overwhelming amount of evidence on the adaptability, growth potential, and contributive potential of retarded people. I have often wondered whether the call for evidence to settle an ideological issue empirically, or to empirically settle an issue that is already empirically settled, is not really one of the perversions in the world (Wolfensberger, 1980).

Many of the research issues and problems reviewed in this chapter remind one painfully of the criticism by Brooks and Baumeister (1977) that so much of the research (in mental retardation at least) has lacked ecological (phenomenological) validity. That spokespersons for a phenomenologically invalid research culture should criticize empirically strongly embedded normalization approaches as lacking empirical validity is indeed a rather sad commentary on the relative bankruptcy of the socio-behavioral research culture.

****Note:** This is a slightly edited version of the classic article which appeared in

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