The Effects of Labeling and Social Desirability on Perceived Success of a Learning Disabled Student

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This research examined the effects of specific learning disability labels and participant social desirability scores on peer judgments of a target person’s social and academic success. Participants were given a description of a fictitious high school student who was labeled as either dyslexic, ADHD, or needing glasses. Participants then made judgments of the student’s social and academic success and completed the Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale. Significant differences were found between the labels ‘dyslexic’ and ‘needing glasses’ for questions related to the fictitious student’s social and academic success whereas social desirability scores were found to have no influence on participants’ ratings of the fictitious student.

In today’s society, it is not uncommon for individuals with disabilities to be ostracized and discriminated against. It is not surprising that Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) found that the drop-out rate for individuals with learning disorders is significantly higher than those who are known as “normal”. Aside from the academic challenges that someone with a learning disability faces, there are a number of social judgments that coincide with the learning disability label. A growing body of research has examined the effects of labeling and found that it often leads to stigmatization. Classic literature by Goffman (1968) describes the processes of stigmatization, claiming, “we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances” (p. 5). Goffman’s observations proved to be highly insightful, and research continues to examine the effects of labeling.

In an age where learning disabilities are frequently diagnosed, it is important to understand the implications of labeling. Graham and Dwyer (1987) found that labeling often leads to negative evaluations. When participants in their study were asked to score essays supposedly written by learning disabled students, the essays were graded more negatively than if they were told the same essays were written by normal students. These findings demonstrate that labeling someone as learning disabled, regardless of their capabilities, will automatically put them at a disadvantage. Not only is achievement affected by labeling, but also social judgments. Research by Ysseldyke and Foster (1976; Ysseldyke & Foster, 1978) showed that teachers who were told that a student was learning disabled or emotionally disturbed rated him more negatively on a behavior checklist than teachers who had been told that he was normal, although his behavior did not change. In a related study, similar results were found by Burdg and Graham (1984), who reported that even a vague label such as ‘developmentally delayed’ impacted teachers’ evaluations of the student in a negative manner. It is clear that social judgments are also affected by generalized labeling, which could prove to disadvantage a learning disabled student further. While it is not the purpose of the label to disadvantage, it may inherently affect perceptions of a disabled student negatively.

While research has documented the negative impact of labeling, it is not clear how specific labels affect peer judgments. The current study examined how specific labels such as ADHD and dyslexia affect a disabled individual’s perceived success. Research has been published that poses the question, “Is ADHD a valid disorder?”. Carey (2002) remains a skeptic, arguing that the diagnosis is highly subjective and ignores the contributory role of the environment. The diagnosis of ADHD has been challenged by a number of authors from varying perspectives. Dyslexia, on the other hand, has a more concrete diagnosis. Evidence of dyslexia includes reversing letters and words when reading or writing, whereas ADHD is diagnosed by children appearing hyperactive or distracted, characteristics that are often exhibited by most children. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that individuals who are labeled as having ADHD will be rated less successful than those who are labeled dyslexic. Because ADHD is a highly disputed learning disorder, it is possible that ADHD will be viewed more negatively than a highly credible label such as dyslexia.
Social desirability is commonly thought of as the tendency of individuals to project favorable images of themselves during social interactions (Johnson, Fendrich, & Hubbell, 2002). Because individuals often attempt to portray themselves in a positive light, it was hypothesized that individuals who scored high on the Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (1960) would rate the fictitious student more positively in all conditions than students with average or low scores.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants included 60 undergraduate students enrolled in 3 sections of introductory psychology at a northeastern public university. Thirty-three females and 27 males participated in the study. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (78.3%), freshman (83.3%), aged 20 or less (81.7%). Participants received course credit for participating in this research study.

**Materials**

A description of a fictitious high school student was given to each participant (see Appendix A). The description contained academic and social information about the student. After reading the description, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix B) containing a number of items regarding recall of factual information, as well as judgments about the fictitious student’s future. Participants made judgments on a 7-point Likert Scale, with seven being the most successful. “John,” the fictitious student, was evaluated in 2 areas: academic success and social success. John’s academic success was measured by his general future success (as asked in question 4) as well as his ability to graduate high school with honors (question 6). Social success was measured by how well participants thought John was liked by his peers (question 8) and his teachers (question 10). After each judgment was made, participants were asked to justify their response in a sentence or two. After completing the questionnaire, participants completed the Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale.

**Procedure**

Data was collected in a classroom setting. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Each condition was given the same description of a fictitious high school student except that he was labeled differently in the three conditions. In condition 1, the student was labeled as having ADHD, in condition 2, as dyslexic, and in condition 3, he was not labeled with any kind of learning disability. Instead he was described as needing glasses. Participants were asked to read the description thoroughly for two minutes. They were then asked to complete a questionnaire with questions regarding factual information about the fictitious student, as well as questions regarding their predictions of how successful the student would be both socially and generally. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were then administered the Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale, which was relabeled as a True/False Questionnaire to minimize demand characteristics. This ensured participants would not give biased answers upon learning the intent of the scale.

**Results**

Differences were first analyzed for age, gender and ethnicity to determine if these variables impacted students’ performances. No differences were found as a result of these participant variables in a t-test for independent groups. Therefore, further analysis was pursued. As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, the means of the ADHD condition were consistently lower than those for the glasses condition for all questions. Even more so, the means for dyslexia were lower for all questions compared to the glasses condition and the ADHD condition. Observed minimums show that the lowest scores were given to both the learning disability labels, whereas the minimum scores for the glasses condition were higher. Observed maximum scores reveal that dyslexia was the only label that received a 6 as its highest score for 2 questions, however the other labels all received sevens as their highest scores for all questions.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Obs. Min-Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>success in future graduate with honors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.024</td>
<td>3-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>success in future graduate with honors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.945</td>
<td>3-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasses</td>
<td>success in future graduate with honors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>.905</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.385</td>
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</table>

**Table 2**

<table>
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<th>Condition</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Obs. Min-Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>liked by peers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>liked by teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>1.195</td>
<td>2-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>liked by peers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>.883</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>liked by teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasses</td>
<td>liked by peers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>liked by teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>.898</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Means for each questionnaire item were analyzed with a one-way between subjects analysis of variance. The results of these analyses revealed that regardless of whether John was presented as ADHD, dyslexic, or needing glasses, none of these labels impacted perceptions of his likelihood of graduating with honors (question 6), $F(2, 57) = 2.209, p = .119$. Conversely, significant differences were identified in the perception of John’s future success (question 4), $F(2, 57) = 6.151, p = .004$. A Scheffé post hoc analysis confirmed that John was expected to be more successful in the future when he was described as wearing glasses than if he was labeled as dyslexic. The presentation of John as an ADHD patient did not significantly impact participants’ evaluations of John’s future success.

Perception of social success was also analyzed with a one-way ANOVA. Results showed that the label significantly impacted perceptions of John’s social success with his peers (question 8), $F(2, 57) = 3.496, p = .037$. As shown in Table 2, John was perceived as more socially successful with his peers when he wore glasses ($M = 6.11$) than when he was described as dyslexic ($M = 5.40$). Again, the label ADHD did not significantly impact participants’ judgments of his social success. In terms of John being liked by his teachers (question 10), significant differences were found as a result of labeling, $F(2, 57) = 3.267, p = .045$. Because of the conservative nature of Scheffé’s test, no significant differences were identified among the 3 conditions in post hoc analysis. Because ADHD was found to be nonsignificant for all questions, a t-test for independent groups was used to compare the label dyslexic with “needing glasses” for question 10. Results showed that the glasses label was rated significantly more positive than the dyslexia label, $t(36.947) = -2.560, p = .015$.

The data was also analyzed by taking into account the participants’ social desirability scores. An ANCOVA showed that social desirability did not significantly impact any perception, with all $F$ scores having $p > .18$. Frequencies were also examined, and 8 individuals scored low on social desirability while 43 scored average, and 9 scored high in social desirability. Because the participants’ scores were predominantly average according to standards reported by Crowne and Marlowe (1960), further analysis was not performed.

**Discussion**

The results of this study supported the findings of past research that labeling leads to negative evaluations. However, contrary to what was hypothesized, ADHD was not viewed as negatively as dyslexia. Perhaps this occurrence can be attributed to the common diagnosis of ADHD today. Commercials are advertised on TV for medications for ADHD, and it could be the case that many people are familiar with this disorder and do not perceive it to be as inhibiting as other learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Many participants reported that ADHD could be easily cured with medication in their responses. Dyslexia, on the other hand, was rated more negatively than both ADHD and “needing glasses” in terms of perceived academic success and social success of the diagnosed individual. Participants often handicapped John in their responses, stating that it would be difficult to succeed with such a disability. Perhaps the majority of the public is not aware that the symptoms of dyslexia can be overcome with specialized training. Future research should also include a manipulation check that asks the participant about dyslexia, to see if they understand the meaning of such a disability. It is possible that because there is no medication for dyslexia, it is viewed as more debilitating than ADHD.

With no learning disability label, John was perceived as generally successful. Participants described him as “smart” and “a good student”. Conceivably, glasses make individuals appear more studious, and hence the glasses could have resulted in John’s high success ratings. It would be interesting to examine this concept in future studies by including a description of John with no label. Because no significant results were found for the second measure of academic success (John graduating with honors), it would be interesting to see how other academic situations would affect his evaluations. In retrospect, perhaps not enough information was given about John to decide if he would be able to graduate with honors. This would explain why the mean scores for question six were all very close to the midpoint of 4 on the 7-point scale.

Social desirability also proved to have no effect on participants’ judgments. According to research by Johnson et al. (2002), the Crowne-Marlowe Scale is not an independent predictor of the tendency to provide socially desirable answers in social surveys. Therefore, future research including social desirability as a contributing factor in social judgments should utilize other means to assess social desirability.

Overall, these results have important implications. This research suggests that specific learning disability labels affect perceptions of the labeled individual differently. Clearly, social and academic success is viewed as less attainable for an individual with a label such as dyslexia. While past research has claimed that learning disability labels are harmful, this research suggests that not all labels are viewed the same. Because there were no significant differences found with ADHD, these findings suggest that this label is not perceived negatively by a small number of college students. It is also possible that familiarity with the disability plays an important role in these judgments. Future research should expand on this notion, and examine the cause of varied perceptions between specific learning disability labels.

**References**


Appendix A

Description

John Barrett is a sixteen year-old student at Terrytown High School. He lives with his mother and father in a small blue house at the end of a cul-de-sac on Maple Drive. He has two brothers and a pet German Shepard named Cody. John spends a lot of his time with his friends and enjoys going to baseball games, he says his favorite player is Randy Johnson. While at school, John spends much of his time socializing with his friends in the cafeteria. His favorite subject is Math, although he struggles with a few of his classes. John has difficulties reading and has been falling behind in his English classes. Recently, one of his teachers approached him about this, and recommended that he see someone about it, as his grades were suffering. John was sent to the school psychologist, and upon his evaluation, (he was diagnosed with ADHD/he was diagnosed with dyslexia/it was found that he needed glasses). His school psychologist then referred him to a professional who could provide him with the assistance he needs.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions.

1. Who is John’s favorite baseball player?

2. What is John’s favorite subject?

3. What type of dog does John have?

4. How successful do you think John will be in the future? (On a scale from 1-7, 7 being most successful)

5. Why? (In a sentence or two)

6. How likely is it that John will graduate high school with honors? (On a scale from 1-7, 7 being highly likely)

7. Why? (In a sentence or two)

8. How well do you think John is liked by his peers? (On a scale from 1-7, 7 being most liked)

9. Why? (In a sentence or two)

10. How liked is John by his teachers? (On a scale from 1-7, 7 being most liked)

11. Why? (In a sentence or two)