

## Helping the Handicapped: How Realistic is the Performance Feedback Received by the Physically Handicapped<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** In an attempt to demonstrate that handicapped individuals tend to receive inaccurate feedback, a situation was created in which able-bodied subjects were asked to administer performance feedback to a confederate, presented either as handicapped or able-bodied. The confederate's performance followed a predetermined script intended to be perceived as a below-average performance. Analysis of the data showed that feedback to the able-bodied confederate was significantly different from that administered to handicapped confederates. An internal analysis of the data revealed that the difference in feedback was not because subjects expected the handicapped confederate to perform less well than the able-bodied. It was concluded that the "norm-to-be-kind" hypothesis was supported by the data.

It is now a well documented fact that initial face to face interactions between able-bodied and physically handicapped individuals are stressful and uncomfortable for both parties. Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf (1966) found that subjects interacting with an apparently handicapped confederate were more inhibited and controlled, and were inclined to terminate the interaction sooner than subjects interacting with the same confederate presented as non-handicapped. The same study also revealed that when interacting with the handicapped confederate, subjects distorted their opinions to conform to the stereotype of what handicapped persons should like to hear. Similarly, Comer and Piliavin (1972) demonstrated an equivalent tension on the part of handicapped subjects when they were interacting with the non-handicapped. Richardson (1976), in reviewing a wide range of studies on the topic, offers the following generalization: "The initial interaction between handicapped and non-handicapped individuals frequently includes a feeling of ambivalence on the part of the non-handicapped person. For fear of revealing the negative aspect of the ambivalence, the non-handicapped person is more formal and controlled." (p. 20)

Sigall and Page (1972) studied subjects interacting with a blatantly obnoxious confederate who again was presented as either able-bodied or handicapped. No subjects negatively evaluated the confederate under normal rating conditions. However, subjects did negatively evaluate the confederate under "bogus pipeline" conditions, where more accurate reflections of the subjects' attitudes would be expected. The highest evaluation was given to the handicapped confederate under normal conditions and the lowest to the handicapped confederate under the "bogus pipeline" condition.

The present study further examined the quality of interaction between handicapped and able-bodied individuals. A situation was created in which subjects gave evaluative feedback in response to a handicapped or non-handicapped confederate's low-quality performance on a task. The task consisted of a game that required hand coordination. In the "handicapped" condition, the confederate appeared disabled, wearing long leg braces and using Canadian crutches. It was hypothesized that performance feedback given a handicapped individual would be less critical and in general more positive than that given a non-handicapped individual, when both have performed a task equally well.

**Method. Subjects.** Forty-eight male undergraduates at Stanford University participated in the study. Twenty-two were students in an introductory psychology course, and received course credit for their participation. The other 26 subjects were sophomores recruited from the student directory; they were each paid \$2.00 for participating.

**Procedure.** A male undergraduate posed as a confederate and two female undergraduates served as experimenters. Subjects administered performance feedback to a confederate over a series of ten experimental trials in the Labyrinth game. This game consists of a maze on a board that can be tilted along two planes. The object of the game is to slide a metal ball through the maze by tilting the board, and to avoid holes in the maze. Each hole is labeled by a certain score, thus making it possible to measure performance in quantitative terms.

Prior to starting trials on the game, the subject was given a fictitious data sheet showing "how people generally do in the task." According to the standards presented in the data sheet, the confederate's subsequent performance, predetermined and constant for all conditions, was well below average.

To begin the experimental procedure, the confederate first performed the task twice. The subject was then asked to predict how well the confederate was going to perform in the subsequent ten trials. During the ten trials, the subject was instructed to try to improve performance of the confederate through the administration of feedback. One feedback message was administered after each trial, and the subject was told to administer feedback according to his or her own judgment. The subject evaluated the confederate's performance using one of six messages, with #6 ("You did very well") being the most positive, and #1 ("You did poorly") the least positive.

To assess the effect of being handicapped on the feedback received, the same confederate was presented as both handicapped and able-bodied to different subjects. A further condition was established in which the handicap might directly detract from the performance of the confederate. In this condition, the confederate, upon being seated, voiced some concern as to whether his leg braces might impair his comfort, thereby interfering with his performance. All other variables were held constant.

**Results and Discussion.** The attempt to simulate a physical handicap on the part of the confederate was effective. Only six of the 48 subjects questioned whether the confederate's handicap was genuine; the data for these six subjects was not included in the analysis.

The manipulation to make subjects perceive confederate's performance as below average was also successful. Subjects indicated a mean expected performance of 9.49 points, whereas actual performance yielded a mean of only four points.

**Performance Feedback.** Analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect for handicap of the confederate on feedback received ( $F(2,39) = 3.49, p < .05$ ). Subject exhibited no significant trends over trials in administration of feedback.

One possible explanation for this finding can be offered in terms of societal norms. Western society dictates that we must be kind to those less fortunate than ourselves: the handicapped, the elderly, etc. It follows that even though the quality of the confederate's performance was below that expected, societal pressure prevented subjects from administering very negative feedback to the handicapped performer. This might be seen as a "norm-to-be-kind to the disadvantaged" hypothesis.

A derivative of the "norm-to-be-kind" hypothesis is the suggestion that subjects might have a tendency to believe that a more effective way of improving the performance of a handicapped individual is by rewarding him, whereas non-

handicapped individuals would improve faster when punished.

Finally, it may be that a physical handicap lends an aura of diminished general competence to an individual, so that subjects would expect lower performance on the part of the handicapped individuals. There would therefore be no reason to punish the confederate's low performance—that is, evaluate him negatively—since it would only be what was expected of him. To examine this last suggestion further, an analysis of expectation ratings was undertaken.

*Expectation Ratings.* While subjects exhibited a tendency to expect handicapped confederates to perform less well than the non-handicapped confederate, this trend was not significant ( $p > .10$ ). However, coupled with a significant negative correlation between expectation level and feedback ( $r = -.45$ ,  $t(40) = 3.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ), this tendency raises the possibility that the handicapped confederate was evaluated more favorably because subjects had lower expectations for his performance. An analysis of covariance was therefore done to compare feedback administered with effects of performance expectations factored out.

Table 1: Mean and Residual Feedback Administered by Subjects

	Handicapped/ Relevant	Handicapped/ Non-Relevant	Non- Handicapped	Significance
Mean Feedback	3.04	3.04	2.56	$F = 3.49$ $p < .05$
Residual Feedback Expectations Factored Out	0.18	0.05	-0.23	$F = 4.68$ $p < .05$
Subjects/Group	$n = 14$	$n = 14$	$n = 14$	

Table I shows by group both mean feedback administered, and residual mean feedback with effects of expected performance factored out. Analysis of variance confirmed a significant trend for feedback to be more favorable if the confederate is handicapped, and more favorable still if the handicap is relevant to performance of the task ( $F(1,39) = 4.68$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

These results clearly support the "norm-to-be-kind" hypothesis. The handicapped confederate received more positive feedback than the able-bodied one *independent* of performance expectations of the subject. Furthermore, this effect was increased when it was made salient that the handicap might hinder performance.

The possibility that subjects have a tendency to believe that handicapped individuals should be taught to improve performance by means of reward rather than punishment also seems compatible with these findings. However, in this study, it can hardly be asserted that the handicapped confederate was being rewarded. Although feedback administered to the non-handicapped confederates is statistically different from that administered to handicapped confederates, in absolute terms the difference is that between a negative and slightly less negative message.

That handicapped individuals may receive inaccurate and, in general, less critical feedback has far reaching implications. For instance, if an individual continually receives unrealistically favorable feedback regardless of performance, the quality of the feedback may be attributed to the favorable attitude of the feedback dispenser, or simply ignored. On the other hand, if this generally praising dispenser unexpectedly gives negative feedback, the recipient might then perceive the feedback as truly reflecting the quality of the performance. This may lead handicapped individuals to ignore most positive feedback, attributing it to the favorableness of the dispenser, and only pay attention to negative feedback. Considering the exten-

sive literature on differences in learning affected by negative as opposed to positive feedback, this finding would go a long way in helping explain socialization differences between handicapped and non-handicapped individuals.

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#### Footnotes

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