

ACTIVITY

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MENTAL ILLNESS

James M. Gardner

Concept

We often make judgments about the behavior of other people, determining whether particular acts were or were not appropriate. Occasionally we may even decide, based on our observations, that someone is "mentally ill." This exercise offers a classroom opportunity to study such attributions.

Instructions

Ask for six volunteers to play roles in a skit. Take them out of the room and have them choose a role from six 3 × 5 inch cards bearing the following descriptions:

1. You are an escaped convict, previously convicted of murder.
2. You are a successful business executive whose spouse just announced the existence of a love affair, whose child is in the hospital, and whose car broke down this morning.
3. You are married with two children and unemployed; you desperately need a job and are on your way to an interview.
4. You are on your way to a sale.
5. You are lonely, have few friends, became bored watching TV, and are going somewhere just to have something to do.
6. You are waiting at the bus stop for the bus. Your role is to try to engage each of the waiting passengers in conversation so that the class can observe how they act. Some questions that you might ask are: Do you have the proper time? Does the bus usually run late?

While the actors study their roles, return to the room and instruct the other students to observe closely the behavior of each actor. Bring in the actor who drew the sixth role—the catalyst. Then bring in the other actors one by one, and let them interact with the catalyst for about 1 minute each.

When the skit is over, have the actors return to their seats. On the chalkboard, set up a matrix with the names of the actors in a vertical column on the left; list them in any order, except put the catalyst's name last. Tell the class that the six actors were playing roles, that you are going to list those roles across the top of the matrix, and that you are going to poll the class to determine how many believe each actor could have been playing each role. Also tell them that you are going to include a role that no one played. Then list the roles one at a time, polling students on each one before you list the next. List the roles in the same order as they appear above, but insert "a mentally ill person" between the third and fourth roles.

Adapted from the "Mental Illness Game" by James M. Gardner, *Teaching of Psychology*, 1976, 3(3), 141–142. Copyright 1976 by Division Two of the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

When the voting is completed, examine the data. First, determine which actors appeared to play several roles and which were identified with only one role. Next, determine which roles were clearly identified and which appeared to be played by many actors. Then ask the actors to state which role they played. It will become apparent that no one was assigned the role of "a mentally ill person." Now check how many believed each of the six actors to be playing that role. Compare the total number here to totals for other roles. Usually the total for "a mentally ill person" is one of the highest.

Discussion

This outcome can lead to a discussion of how easy it is for people to be labeled mentally ill when there is no psychological problem present. Ask the students to verbalize what behaviors they observed in the actors that they felt were indicative of mental illness. Is there any agreement on those behaviors? Were those behaviors exhibited by actors who were not thought to be mentally ill? You can add a number of topics to the discussion such as witch hunts and the legal definition of insanity. You can also discuss the concept of mental illness. Does the use of the term *illness* promote a medical model? What other terms are used and how are they different?

Suggested Background Readings

- Gardner, J. M. *Community psychology: The left hand of the magician*. New York: Plenum, 1980.
- Sahakian, W. S. (Ed.). *Psychopathology today*. Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock, 1970.
- Szasz, T. S. The myth of mental illness. *American Psychologist*, 1960, 15, 113-118.
- Szasz, T. S. *The manufacture of madness*. New York: Delta, 1970.

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Instruction