



Social perspective-taking performance: Construct, measurement, and relations with academic performance and engagement

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ABSTRACT

Social perspective-taking (SPT), the social-cognitive skill of inferring, considering, and evaluating others' perspectives, is critical in allowing students to engage not only with others in social interactions, but also with many academic materials and activities. However, due to complex conceptualizations of SPT, as well as challenges to its measurement, little research has examined the role of SPT in student learning. Using a new measure, the Assessment of Social Perspective-taking Performance (ASPP), this article presents evidence that SPT can be conceptualized as a set of measurable developmental performative skills relevant to classroom learning in early adolescence: *articulation* of actors' beliefs/intentions and *positioning* of actors in their social contexts. Examination of its psychometric properties provides evidence that ASPP can precisely assess students' SPT performance across varying levels of those skills. Lastly, we find positive associations of SPT with academic engagement and standardized test scores.

Introduction

Theoretical and empirical evidence from both experimental and correlational studies consistently suggest that social-emotional competence can promote students' school success by improving the attitudes and behaviors that foster commitment to academics and school performance (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham et al., 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). One aspect of social-emotional competence, social perspective-taking skill (SPT: Gehlbach, 2004a, 2004b; Selman, 1980, 2007), may be especially relevant to academic performance, as it encompasses the social-cognitive ability to infer, consider, and critically evaluate the points of view of authors of academic texts or of characters in literature, and is therefore a plausible bridge to engagement with those texts (Duhaylongsod, Snow, Selman, & Donovan, 2015). However, highly variable conceptualizations scattered across different strands of research have limited researchers' abilities both to measure *SPT performance* as it matures throughout the school years, and consequently, to develop assessment tools that could justifiably be used to assess efforts

to foster SPT in school through curricular interventions. This article presents one way of moving beyond these limitations, by developing a conceptualization of SPT that is especially relevant to educational contexts. Building on Austin's (1962) notion of speech acts, the current paper conceptualizes *SPT acts* (Diazgranados, Selman, & Dionne, 2016) as having two facets: *articulation* of the content of social actors' communicative acts, and *positioning* those acts as products of the social actors' experiences. In this article we explore how a measure based on this conceptualization can capture children's SPT performance across social contexts and situations in schools, and examine the relationship between SPT acts and academic engagement as well as performance in standardized tests.

Conceptualizing SPT

While different versions of SPT have been explored across research fields pertaining to child development, there is disagreement within the literature on how best to characterize this construct or to measure it in academic contexts (Diazgranados et al., 2016). Current understandings of SPT during middle childhood and adolescence emerge from research on social-emotional development (e.g., Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004),

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cognitive development (e.g., Ryskin, Benjamin, Tullis, & Brown-Schmidt, 2015), and atypical development (e.g., Brown, Oram-Cardy, & Johnson, 2012; Ricketts, Jones, Happé, & Charman, 2013). In addition, SPT is often identified with complementary but distinct concepts such as theory of mind (Pelletier, 2006), narrative empathy (Keen, 2007), social cognition (Shantz, 1982), or social information processing (Dodge, 1986; Donahue, 2001). These lines of research often highlight the various cognitive processes that are prerequisites for SPT. For example, theory of mind, the ability to take others as agents with their own thoughts, knowledge and intentions (e.g., Carlson & Moses, 2001), is a necessary precursor to understanding and drawing inferences about the perceived intentions of another person. Gehlbach (2004a) conceptualization of SPT, comprising the skill of reading others' beliefs and intentions as well as the motivation to enact that skill, implicates motivational as well as cognitive processes. Conceptualizations of SPT as a multi-dimensional construct are particularly useful for increasing the current understanding of how SPT is applied and can best be fostered in academic contexts.

The notion of SPT acts that we adopt and explore here arises out of social-relational models of perspective-taking, rather than cognitive-representational models (Diazgranados et al., 2016), precisely because of their applicability to academic contexts. While many experiences and contextual cues can facilitate the enactment of SPT skills (e.g., drawing inferences from another's tone of voice, reading facial expressions: Gehlbach, 2017), such cues are typically unavailable during academic activities such as comprehending academic texts. For example, when reading a historical text about an oppressed ancient people or writing an essay recommending a course of action to address a current social or political issue, students must consider and analyze the various underlying perspectives, based only on the text and their own accumulated knowledge and experiences. They must bear in mind not only the perspective of one or more other individuals but also the provenance of that perspective. That is, independent of a student's motivation to take another person's perspective (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Wang, 2012), we can explore that student's propensity for *articulating* others' perspectives and, more crucially, for *expressing her grasp* of the social basis of those perspectives—how the social role of a person whose perspective is taken and expressed fundamentally shapes that perspective. By foregrounding the ability to articulate and position others' perspectives in a social context, the conceptualization of SPT as SPT acts highlights a distinctly academically relevant variant of perspective-taking, and one that could potentially be intervened upon to enhance students' capability to apply their social-cognitive functions in their understanding of curricular content and their engagement with their classroom communities. Although 'accurate' and 'ethical' SPT is of great value in human discourse and interaction, in educational contexts simply displaying the skill to generate perspective-taking must be present, and more importantly, enacted.

SPT and success in school

Being able to consider multiple perspectives and intentions is a critical developmental skill for learning in 21st-century classrooms, facilitating the processing of information from a variety of sources as well as effective communication with others (Schlitz et al., 2011; Takacs, 2003). SPT is associated with cooperative behaviors (e.g., Johnson, 1975), which teachers have identified as essential to students' success in the classroom (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004), and it is predictive of long-term academic achievement (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). SPT is also important for building and fostering meaningful social relationships in school (Dodge, 1986; Dodge et al., 2003). Positive social relationships serve as the basis for students' sense of relatedness to peers and teachers alike, which promotes academic motivation and engagement (Gehlbach, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In addition, SPT can facilitate both students' engagement with

academic content and instructional activities and their comprehension of academic texts (Gehlbach, 2011; LaRusso et al., 2016). By being able (and, importantly, willing and ready) to consider others' perspectives, students can better relate their own experiences to those of actors mentioned in academic texts. For example, in literary and historical narratives, different actors may have distinct experiences of the same events (e.g., emancipation from a slave's point of view is property theft from a plantation owner's). Beyond the classroom, students may encounter news and op-ed articles with very different accounts of the same social, civic, or political issues (e.g., the minimum wage, amnesty for immigrants) that implicitly or explicitly reflect their authors' ideological positions. Because individuals hold and express their own distinctive points of view on contentious issues, managing these conflicting characterizations of events and information depends in part on SPT skills: a reader must draw inferences both about and from the capabilities, attributes, expectations, feelings, and potential reactions (Light, 1979) of the actors in the texts in light of the text and its context (implicit as well as explicit) if she is to critically analyze and synthesize the information, and ultimately integrate it with what she already knows. This may be an increasingly important skill in middle and high school classrooms, where the complexity of the academic texts rises, often taking detached, general, and authoritative stances instead of the personal, concrete, and specific perspectives that students are accustomed to in literary texts and informal communicative settings (Goldman & Snow, 2015; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

Measuring SPT: advances and challenges

Given the variety of SPT conceptualizations that have been proposed in the literature, efforts to measure this construct have also varied in their methods, each with their own strengths and limitations (Diazgranados et al., 2016; Gehlbach, 2004a). Self-reports are a particularly popular approach for assessing many aspects of SPT, both in children and adults. However, for some key components of SPT, such as SPT self-efficacy, scores on these self-report measures suffer from subjectivity bias and have been found to be poor indicators of SPT competence in actual social contexts (Ames & Kammrath, 2004; Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009; Realo et al., 2003). Scenario- or situation-based measures (e.g., Gehlbach, 2004b; Schultz, Selman, & LaRusso, 2003; Selman & Feigenberg, 2010) offer another approach that has some advantages for assessing SPT competencies over self-report. By probing SPT across multiple scenarios or hypothetical situations, these measures take into account the variability of SPT across contexts (e.g., a peer versus a parent-child conflict, a familiar situation versus an unfamiliar one, a violent setting versus a safe setting) (Gehlbach, 2004a; LaRusso & Selman, 2011). With existing situation-based assessments, children typically select answers to SPT questions from multiple choice options or lists (Gehlbach, 2004b; Schultz et al., 2003), which captures their capacity to recognize the best or most accurate answer. While accuracy is one aspect of children's SPT competence, these measures do not provide an opportunity to observe children taking and interpreting another's perspective on their own without the prompts offered by the multiple choice options. The assessment of children's ability to perform SPT is critical; however, methods to assess SPT performance are rare.

Situation-based interviews are one method to examine SPT performance. Open-ended questions provide access to the child's understanding so that it is also possible to assess more complex forms of SPT, for example, third-person perspective-taking and the integration of multiple points of view. Unfortunately, interviews are typically very costly and time-consuming, given the need to interview participants individually and transcribe responses for coding. In school settings, the logistics of scheduling interviews, interruptions to instructional time, and consent procedures for research purposes can also be prohibitive. In addition, SPT assessment conducted via verbal interviews is unlikely to provide a valid picture of students' ability to apply SPT skills and

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