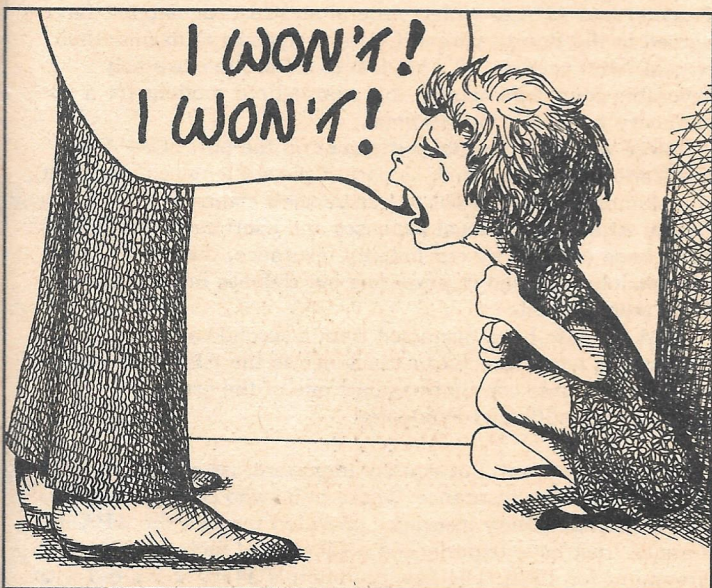


Is there a PhD in the house



Drawing by Jane Zich

By Jerry M. Burger

It happened again the other night. I was sitting in the audience waiting for my son's class to perform in their annual pageant when the school director asked over the microphone, "Is there a doctor in the house?" What she meant, of course, was "Is there an M.D. in the audience?" It seems a little girl had hurt herself backstage.

Now, I have nothing against the medical profession. But just once I would like to have the following fantasy realized. . . .

. . . **I AM** sitting in the audience waiting for my son's class to perform. The school director grabs the microphone and pleads, "Is there a social psychologist in the house?" Without hesitating, I rise to my feet and dutifully rush backstage.

"I'm a social psychologist," I identify myself.

"Thank goodness," the director replies. "It's little Susie. She's supposed to sing the solo in the upcoming number, but now she says she doesn't want to do it."

I am taken immediately to the recalcitrant Susie. She is hiding her face in a corner of the dressing room, clenching her fists and repeating to her teacher who looks helplessly on, "I won't do it! I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Stand back," I order the teacher as I decisively take charge of the situation. "Quickly, what was Susie's attitude toward the show earlier today?"

"She held a positive evaluation," the director says. "In addition to her stated intention to engage in the behavior, she successfully performed the action during the rehearsal."

If only I could go to my office and get my semantic differential, I think to myself. But seconds are precious now, and I know I must settle for a quick one-item Likert scale assessment, with questionable psychometric properties.

"Susie," I say gently but authoritatively to the girl. "On a scale from one to seven with one being not at all and seven being very much, to what extent would you like to be in the show tonight?"

Susie remains quiet. My best judgment is to generate compliance through psychological reactance. "Well, Susie," I say. "I'm glad you didn't answer. In fact, I'm not going to let you answer."

The manipulation is successful. Just as Susie's parents arrive and begin nervously staring over my shoulder she answers, "One."

I turn to the director, teacher and parents and decide to give it to them straight: "My advice is to induce cognitive dissonance immediately." They fall silent.

Quickly I pull a dollar bill out of my pocket and ask a nearby student to be my confederate. "Susie," I say, "I'll give you only one dollar if you'll tell Vicki how much fun it is to be in the show."

Slowly the would-be soloist turns around, grabs the dollar, and begins to explain to the "other student" what joy she will receive by performing.

When she is finished, I quickly administer my post-treatment measure. "Susie, on a scale from one to seven with one being not at all and seven being very much, to what extent do you want to be in the show tonight?"

Everyone in the room holds his or her breath as Susie waits for what seems like hours before replying. She looks up at me and announces weakly, "Six."

The teacher and director breathe a sigh of relief. The parents shake my hand and then hug their child. As I walk back to my seat the director describes over the loudspeaker what I have done and how the show has been saved. The audience responds with a resounding round of applause.

"Please, please," I say modestly to those around me. "All in a social psychologist's line of duty." ■

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