

# Behavioral Literacy – A Theoretical Approach

Carmen Schmitz-Feldhaus, Manfred Wittrock

Department of Special Needs Education & Rehabilitation, University of Oldenburg, Germany  
\*Corresponding Author: carmen.feldhaus@uni-oldenburg.de

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**Abstract** Many children show a behavior, with regards to certain values or belief systems, in specific social situations, in specific social institutions that are labeled as "inappropriate". These youth are the focus of our concept. Our aim is to figure out whether the reason for the inadequate attitude towards social interactions might have to do with certain aspects we summarize in the construct of Behavioral Literacy. These factors include normative frames of social situations and social institutions, skills to act properly in those situations, the ability to perform a transfer, or the motivation to "fit in". We need to learn more about the background of the inappropriate behavior of children and adolescents in specific social situations to help them to succeed in an inclusive setting. In order to get this information, we started a project called "Behavioral Literacy". It is our understanding that the phenomenon "Behavioral Literacy" has to do with multidimensional factors such as rules, norms, situations, behavior of oneself and of others, and of the frames those factors are related to. Till now there have been several pilot and explorative studies. The first results indicate that some children and juveniles simply don't know about the demands of specific social situations and/ or social institutions. We need more knowledge driven by research results and we plan to expand our efforts. All over the world, adolescents with severe problems behave or act behaviorally literate in social

situations. In this article we will describe in detail our preliminary theoretical framework of the concept "behavioral literacy". Before we conceptualize further studies we would like to share our great interest in this topic with colleagues in different countries.

**Keywords** Behavioral Literacy, EBD, Front Behavior, ASD

## 1. Introduction

Some students, children and adolescents, with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) just don't fit in regarding challenging social situations (see figure 1).

They seem to act like, so to say, a bull in a china shop. But why do they behave that way? All of the students have specific resources (disposition, special skills and abilities, mental possibilities, and a physical appearance. The interaction is a social situation with a specific ethically normative frame. Sometimes the student just doesn't behave appropriately and in doing so, doesn't fit in to the social situation. The construct of Behavioral Literacy tries to answer the question, as follows.

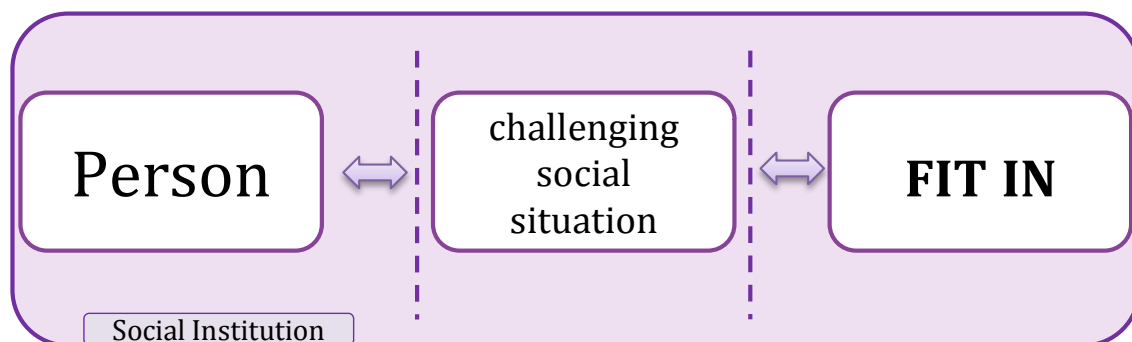


Figure 1. Introduction to the problem

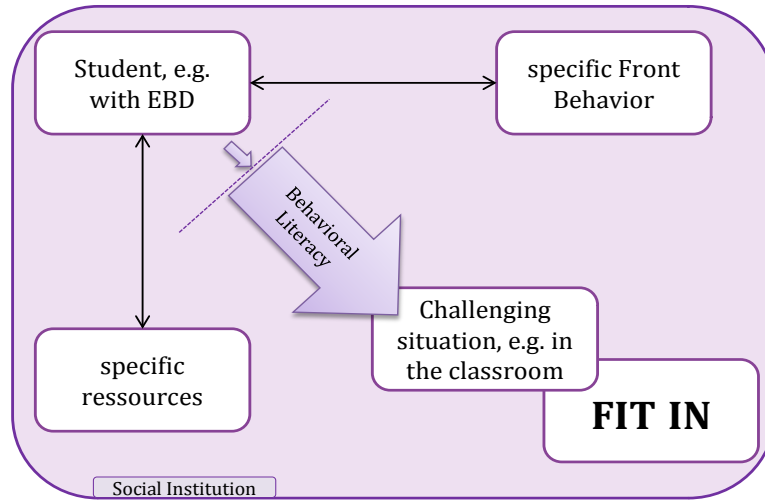


Figure 2. Behavioral Literacy

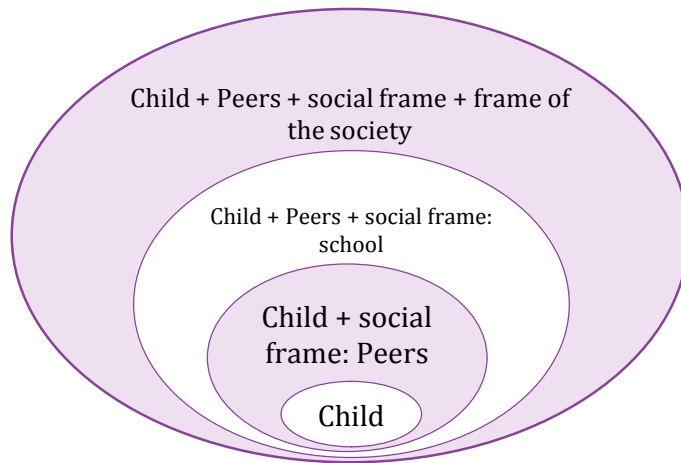


Figure 3. The Different Kinds of Specific Frames within the Systems

Figure 2 shows a visualized impression of the problem and its conditional factors. “Front and/or Masking Behavior” can also be seen, which in our understanding is a specific form of Behavioral Literacy and is the focus of another of our projects.

## 2. Project Issue

Our day-to-day life is characterized by a large number of social interactions and social situations. Every day we experience situations, sometimes new, but mostly similar to facts that we have already witnessed. For all of those cases, one aspect is the same: we have to read the social frame we face at that moment and we have to read the behavior of the involved persons. In our opinion this is a special social competence and is defined as Behavioral Literacy. This competence, or skill, is important for every day life in preschool, school, and beyond, as well as for families. It is crucial for every person, especially professionals such as teachers, therapists, instructors, and trainers, as well as

parents.

## 3. Origin & Social Frames

Our understanding of a child’s development is based on the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner, Lüscher and Cranach (1989) in combination with the Frame Analysis of Goffman (1974) and the social control theory of Hirschi (2009). The older a child gets the further he or she extends his or her systems, and the more each system, containing roles, norms, and rules, can powerfully shape the child’s development and belief system. The frames set the specific norms and roles in the specific social interactions of each system. Figure 2 shows examples of specific social frames in which children find themselves in the situation of showing appropriate behavior and where they have to learn to “fit in”

Our aim is to ensure that children, e.g. those with emotional and behavioral disorders, learn to “fit in” by changing oneself or changing the environment.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

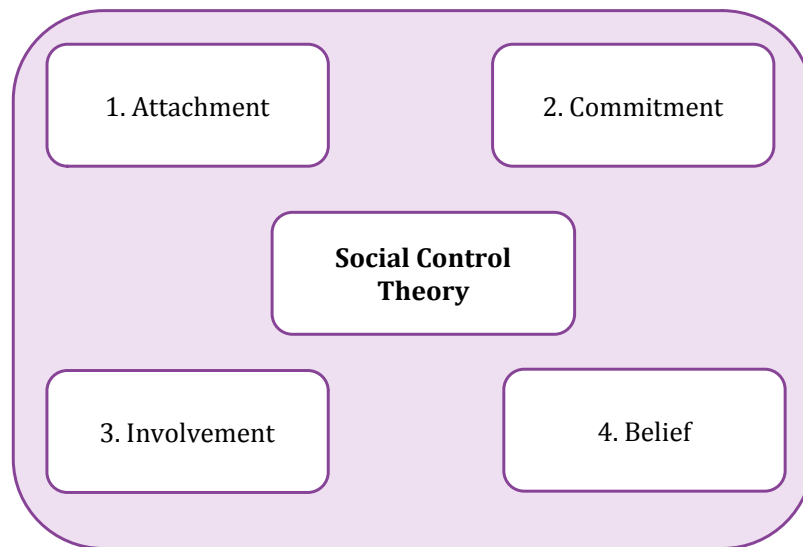
In the theoretical framework of our concept two theories are central:

- 1) Everything is seen regarding the *Frame Analysis* and its four aspects by Goffman. We always consider the general frame of the society, the specific frame of the individual, and the frame of social situation. In doing so, we are able to locate, perceive, involve, and label an unlimited amount of specific incidents because they are defined by means of the frames (Goffman, 1974).
- 2) The *Social Control Theory* by Hirschi and the four elements of the bond try to explain why a person becomes delinquent and thus acts against social norms and laws. As the first element Hirschi states "attachment of the individual to others" is the "essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or superego." On the contrary, someone without attachment to others is "free from moral restraints" and shows psychopathological behavior. "Commitment" is the second element and could be described as a "rational component in conformity." It, in this way, includes (1) a decision-making and its consequences, (2) a positioning of oneself because of one's former behavior and (3) the awareness of the first two aspects as well as the effects of the acting. Because time and energy of a person are limited, Hirschi holds the opinion that "involvement" is another important element of the control theory. Some people are just too busy to act inappropriately because they are involved in conventional activities and with all of their plans, social meetings, and work,

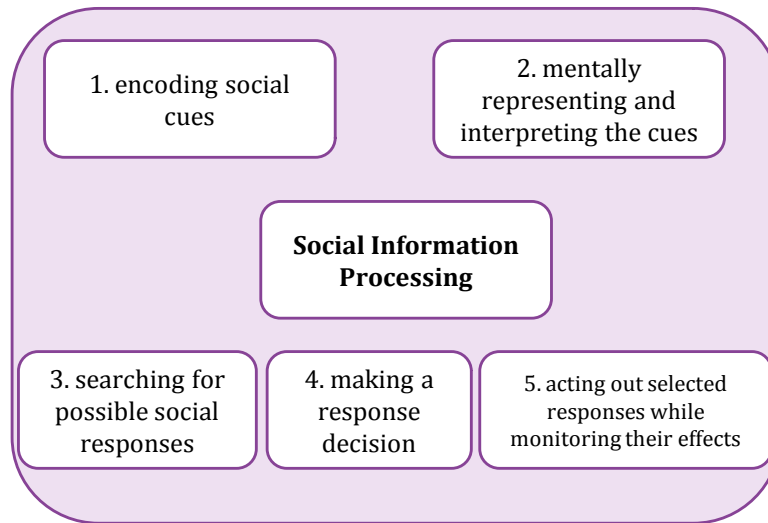
can't even think about being socially inappropriate or delinquent. The last element of the bond regarding the Social Control Theory is "belief" as a "common value system within the society or group". First of all, the theory assumes that the deviant person believes he is doing wrong. Secondly, belief might be seen as mere words, which in specific circumstances mean nothing and can be ignored. Third, the deviant uses the so-called "technique of neutralization." He rationalizes the act and is free to realize it. As a keystone of the argument, it can be assumed that there is a "variation in belief in the moral validity of social rules" (Hirschi, 2009, p. 16).

In addition to these two theories three others are important to explain the phenomenon of "Behavioral Literacy":

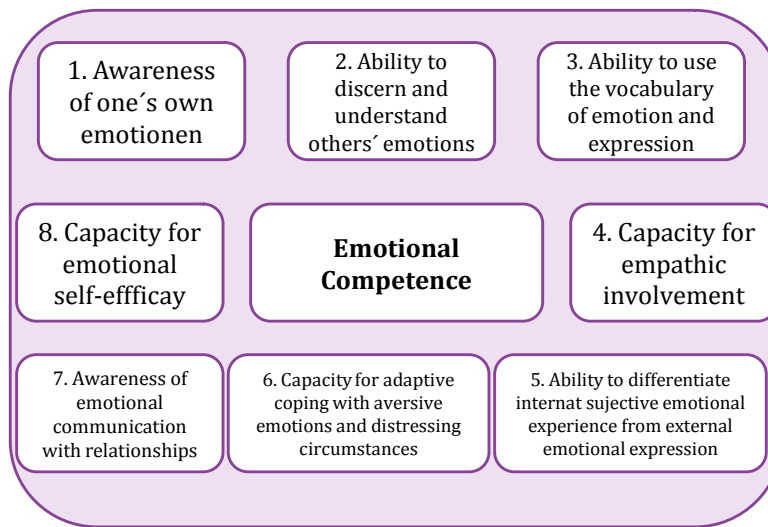
- a) The Social Information Processing has five phases by Dodge which explain the steps a child must go through before he or she can act with competence to social demands such as (1) "encoding situational cues" and (2) "representation and interpretation of those cues." Here, hypothetically, the child focuses on specific cues and designs an individual explanation of the situation. Phase (3) is the "mental search for possible responses to the situation," and phase (4) is the "selection of a response." During the second two phases, the long-term memory of the child is relevant because the child might analyze his or her former experiences and select the one that best fits the circumstances faced at the moment. The fifth phase is the "acting out of the chosen response and monitoring its affects" regarding the interaction (Crick & Dodge, 1994, p. 74).



**Figure 4.** Social Control Theory (4 Aspects, Hirschi)



**Figure 5.** Social Information Processing (5 Phases, Dodge)



**Figure 6.** Emotional Competence (8 Skills, Saarni)

- b) The *Emotional Competence* with eight skills by Saarni. The first skill is the “awareness of one’s emotional state.” It is possible that a person could experience more than one emotion at a time, and with regards to inattention or unconscious aspects, the person is not consciously aware of his or her feelings. The second skill is the “ability to discern others’ emotion, based on situational and expressive cues that have some degree of cultural consensus as to their emotional meaning.” The next skill that Saarni poses is the “ability to use the vocabulary of emotion and expression terms.” The skills are seen as connected to the particular culture and have to be available and link to social roles. Skill four is the “capacity for empathic and sympathetic involvement in others’ emotional experiences” and five is the “ability to realize that [the] inner emotional state need not correspond to outer expression”. This

means that the person I’m interacting with and myself might use some sort of a “front” (see Goffman, 1959) or “mask.” Additionally, my behavior could influence the manner of my opponent, which means that I have to consider what kind of emotion to show. The “capacity for adaptive coping with aversive or distressing emotions by using self-regulatory strategies that ameliorate the intensity or temporal duration of such emotional states” is the sixth skill. Number seven could be described as an awareness of emotional communication within relationships. It includes interpersonal consequences, the consideration of different types of relationships and the fact that emotional communication contains a certain amount of power and authority. The last skill that Saarni postulates is the “capacity for emotional self-efficacy.” This ability is based on an emotional balance and the person’s theory of emotion and

moral sense (Saarni, 1999, p. 5).

Figure 3 shows the afore mentioned theories and the particular keywords for the skills, dimensions, phases, aspects and elements.

- c) The *Sense of Coherence* and its three dimensions by Antonovsky for the purpose of screening with regards to the behavioral-literate ability of the person in question. The sense of coherence is the main aspect of the salutogenetic theory and includes the sense of comprehensibility, the sense of manageability and the sense of meaningfulness. It describes a

“[...] feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to her/him to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement” (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19).

## 5. Definition of Behavioral Literacy

When we started our project there were originally three definitions of the construct Behavioral Literacy, Wittrock writes:

“Behavioral Literacy is the capacity to recognize or identify own behavior i.e. what I am doing – which means also admitting that you are doing it and the behavior of others and also managing behavior. That means you have to be able to read a situation i.e. which behavior is appropriate – is it a church or a playground and have the capacity and the motivation to fit in” (Wittrock, 2005, p. 5).

Rock postulates the goal of Behavioral Literacy is the:

“Acquisition of core skills that lead to the development of emotional competency in students, including prosocial awareness, fluent interpretation of the behavior of self and others, accurate comprehension of behavioral functions and strategic self-regulation and self-correction to monitor and adjust behavior in accordance with environmental and situational demands” (Rock, 2004, p. 10).

Hess-Rice, as opposed to the definitions mentioned afore accentuates three dimensions relates them to Literacy and points out:

“The operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of literacy apply to comprehensive behavioral literacy, the process of learning to behave and to understand the changing

meaning and demands of social contexts. [...]

1. The Operational dimension of Behavioral Literacy consists of skill of interacting with adults and peers, i.e. social skills. Social skill instruction with students with EBD is critical because some students either do not have the innate ability to ‘absorb’ social cues or their experiences in social situations have created a skill set that offends others.”

2. The Cultural dimension describes the “skill and attitude of understanding the demands of a certain context and then acting according to the rules governing that context. For example, students need to be able to differentiate a joke said to them in a locker room from a joke in the main office and be able to react according to the unspoken rules of each place. Both the skill and the context and practice of the skill must be encouraged in order to aid students in their behavioral literacy.”

3. The Critical dimension means “Students with EBD need skills in self-determination as well as having teachers and professionals working with them who question the social construction of “normal” behavior and advocate for the needs of their students to be met on all school activities” (Hess-Rice, 2003, p. 21).

The theoretical background of “Behavioral Literacy” as it has been defined by Hess-Rice is the concept of “Critical Literacy” of the Frankfurt School including Adorno, Habermas and others. The “unique element of critical literacy is social action stemming from readers’ increasing understanding that literacy and who gets to be literate are related to issues of equity and power. [...] Regarding languages and texts, definitions of critical literacy usually adopt an expanded definition of “text” to be anything that can be “read” or interpreted” (McDaniel, 2006, 21f).

After several years of studying the concept, we define Behavioral Literacy as the skill of noticing (observing) the frames of different social interactions or social systems and making sense of the coherent implications. Furthermore, it is the capacity to comprehend emotions and expressions of self and others. And it is a skill to handle these information’s regarding one’s own belief system.

The five stages of behavioral literacy are visualized in figure 7.

In summary, Behavioral Literacy has to do with multidimensional factors such as rules, norms, situations, behavior of oneself and of others and of the frames those factors are related to. But being behavioral literate does not necessarily mean that the persons involved are honorable or that they show only suitable manners. Behavioral literacy is a descriptive phenomenon, not a normative one.

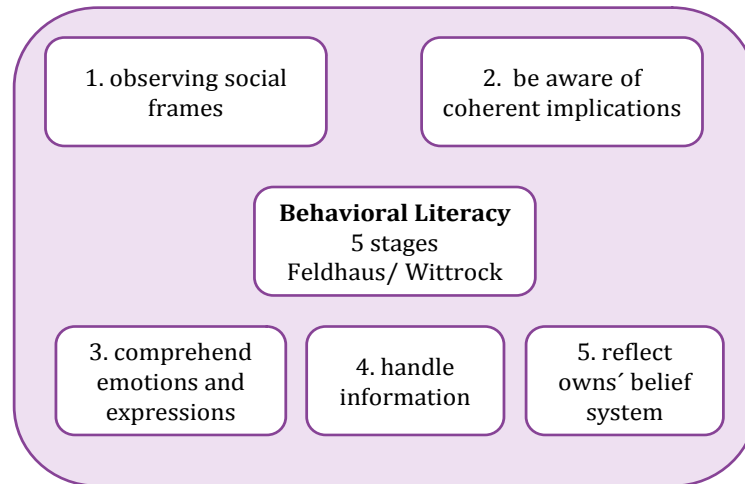


Figure 7. The five stages of Behavioral Literacy

<b>Cat. A</b>	No identification of the social frame.					
<b>Cat. B</b>	Successful identification of the social frame.	No ACTING SKILLS for this frame.				
<b>Cat. C</b>	Successful identification of the social frame.	Acting skill/s for this frame.	No skill to MAKE A TRANSFER to “fit in” in this frame.			
<b>Cat. D</b>	Successful identification of the social frame.	Acting skill/s for this frame.	Skill to make a transfer to “fit in” in this frame.	No MOTIVATION to “fit in”.		
<b>Cat. E</b>	Successful identification of the social frame.	Acting skill/s for this frame.	Skill to make a transfer to “fit in” in this frame.	Motivation to „fit in“	Motivation not coherent to one’s own belief system	
<b>Cat. F</b>	Successful identification of the social frame.	Acting skill/s for this frame.	Skill to make a transfer to “fit in” in this frame.	Motivation to “fit in”.	Motivation coherent to one’s own belief system	No chance (given by others) in making a “fit in” between the frame and oneself.

Figure 8. Categorized Description of Students Skills

### 6. Differential diagnostic aspects: High Functioning Autism

Or in other words, Behavioral Literacy is a construct to measure the ability to show appropriate behavior in different social interactions. But it has to be considered from another perspective, when dealing with people with high functioning autism. People with Autism Spectrum Disorders “ do not engage in affectively charged interactions with other people” (Bowler, 2007, 51).

### 7. Categorized Description of Students Ability Regarding the Concept “Behavioral Literacy”

In using the concept of Behavioral Literacy, we assume

that there are five main categories or types, which describe or explain the maladaptive behavior of children and juveniles. The important aspects in progress are whether or not the person is successful in his or her attempt to fit in, in the social frame with its rules, norms, and expectations, and the shown behavior.

Figure 8 shows the six types of labels and their meanings. In this way, a category-A person is not able to identify or “read” the social frame of the current situation. Someone who is labeled as category-B could read the situation, but does not have the skill to act properly within this social frame. A child that can identify a frame successfully and has the skill for that frame, but does not make a transfer to “fit in” would be categorized as C. Someone from category D just doesn’t have the motivation to “fit in.” Category E checks, whether the motivation is coherent to one’s own belief system. In the last type we assume that the child or youth has no chance to be able to “fit in” because of others intervening

out of cultural or religious reasons.

## 8. Discussions

We have presented our theoretical framework and our research project at several conferences, nationwide and international, with professionals attending from different academic backgrounds. At all of these (symposiums/conventions/ forums) we had very inspiring discussions about the importance of being “behavioral literate” in everyday life. This shows in particular for adolescents coming from different cultural backgrounds, making the transition from school to work (or apprenticeships), or spending time in youth correctional facilities. At all (symposiums/ conventions/ forums) we were encouraged to expand our project with a special emphasis on those settings. We have done a couple of surveys in different types of schools (primary, secondary, vocational) and in Youth Detention Centers (Youth Prison).

## 9. Recommendation

At this time we can offer some recommendations for educational practice or while working with children and adolescents. It is essentially, that all professional persons have to learn to perceive the general and the specific frames in all the social interactions. The Sense of Coherence the three dimensions Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness could be used to equip students with knowledge more individually and taking the interests of the students into account. Additionally, Hirschi’s Control theory and its four elements of the bond, attachment to significant others (parents, peers, school), commitment to conventional values, involvement in conventional subsystems/ activities and belief in conventional values/ goals could add to students understanding of the development of specific new repertoire of manners. And that when teachers consider that the attachment to significant others could be a benefit as well as a disadvantage or that boredom triggered by inadequate activities or tasks could be the reason for unwelcome behavior. Furthermore, the cause for the inappropriate manners of some students might be established in their low level of self-esteem, self-control and self-reflexivity.

The recommendation of these three aspects seems to be important for professional work with children and adolescents who are lacking strategies in the area of behavioral literacy.

We are highly interested in coming into contact with colleagues and professionals from all over the world who are willing to share their interests, their opinions and their research within topics like: behavioral literacy, frame analyses, the sense of coherence, and front or masking behavior.

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