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# Classifying mental retardation and specific strength and deficit areas in severe and profoundly mentally retarded persons with the MESSIER

Johnny L. Matson<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dennis R. Dixon<sup>a</sup>,  
Michael L. Matson<sup>a</sup>, James R. Logan<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA*

<sup>b</sup>*Pinecrest Developmental Center, USA*

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## Abstract

The MESSIER, a measure of social and communication skills and the Vineland Social Maturity Scale were administered to 618 severe and profoundly mentally retarded adults. The goal of the study was to establish the potential utility of the MESSIER for classifying level of intellectual disability in this group. Comparing MESSIER scores to previously established DSM-IV-TR diagnosis, 86% of the severe and 80% of the profoundly mentally retarded persons were correctly classified. The implications of these data in using the MESSIER for classification and treatment planning are discussed.

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The conceptualization and measurement of intelligence has been a hallmark of psychology since the inception of the discipline. Initially, the focus was on distinguishing those who evinced an intellectual disability versus those who did not as a means of classification and school class placement (Bolles, 1993). As the assessment field evolved, it became evident that persons in the lower range of the intellectual handicap range did not exhibit high levels of verbal behavior, which most highly correlated with general

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 225 578 4104; fax: +1 225 578 4125.

E-mail address: [Johnmatson@aol.com](mailto:Johnmatson@aol.com) (J.L. Matson).

intelligence (Belmont, Birch, & Belmont, 1997; Witkin, Faterson, Goodenough, & Birnbaum, 1996). Additionally, for the persons with severe and profound handicaps, standardized I.Q. tests were of minimal value in distinguishing strengths and weakness for treatment planning, a need that became pronounced with the development of an advanced learning based technology that provided the opportunity for considerable skill acquisition gains (Matson, 1990).

As a result of the situation just described, adaptive behavior scales have become very popular in categorizing persons with severe intellectual disabilities. In fact, these scales have been added, along with the I.Q. test, as a required component for assessing intellectual level (APA, 2000; Luckasson et al., 2002). Two scales have emerged as the dominant means of measuring adaptive behaviors, the American Association on Mental Deficiency Adaptive Behavior Scale (Nihira, Foster, Shellhaas, & Leland, 1974), and the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (Doll, 1947). While updates in norms have occurred, the measures continue to measure the same major domains of human functioning such as communication, daily living, socialization and motor skills. These two scales have been developed to assist in better identifying specific skills that allow the person to cope with their environment (Leland, 1983). Nonetheless, these scales tend to fall short in describing possible treatment goals, which is the primary reason to use these measures versus classification, for persons in the severe and profound range.

The Matson Evaluation of Social Skills for Individuals with sEvere Retardation (MESSIER) (Matson, 1995) is a scale measuring social and communication skills that has been designed specifically for use with persons evincing severe and profound deficits in mental retardation. Given the need to develop a scale that can be used not only for classification but also for better identification of skills deficits and excesses in the severe/profound group of persons with intellectual deficits, a measure that more precisely classifies levels of developmental disability in the severe and profound range would have the added advantage of providing a much more detailed picture of their strengths and weaknesses. These data would be of considerable assistance in treatment and placement decisions.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

Participants were 618 adult residents at a large Southeastern developmental center. The sample consisted of data gathered from 260 females and 358 males. Participant's ethnic identification was Caucasian ( $n = 467$ ), African American ( $n = 150$ ), and Other-unspecified ( $n = 1$ ). Participants ranged in age from 9 to 93 years of age ( $M = 47.69$ ,  $S.D. = 14.41$ ). The sample consisted of 87 individuals with severe mental retardation and 531 with profound mental retardation.

### 1.2. Materials

The MESSIER (Matson, 1995) is an indirect assessment used to measure social skills in persons with intellectual disabilities who are in the severe and profound range. It consists of

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