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PERPETUATION OF DELINQUENCY THROUGH LANGUAGE USAGE

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In dealing with youthful male delinquents, one is constantly made aware of their unique form of intercommunication. The general pattern and the vocabulary of the communication resembles the "jive talk" of jazz musicians and disc jockeys, but with modifications and many elements added. The modifications seem to have come from the group of delinquents who have come intimately into contact with the narcotic traffic. The added elements appear to come largely from institutions, juvenile halls, probation forestry camps and correctional facilities, both military and civilian. When one considers the extremely close interpersonal contacts in such situations, the usual tendency for the inmates to feel united in opposition to controlling staff and the often noted identification of the neophyte in delinquency with the louder, more wordy-wise individual, it is quite apparent how this unique language form may be augmented in such a situation. From these various sources, then there emerges a language that shares many common words with the mother tongue, but which is quite incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

If we subscribe to Johnson's¹ views, "talking to themselves unceasingly, men spin without end a net of words by which their thoughts, indeed their destinies, are stayed. Men think with words . . ." the relationship between the communicated symbols and continued delinquency may be seen, for if the vocabulary is made up of words with a delinquent connotation, then it follows that the ideas growing out of this vocabulary will be of a delinquent nature.

HOW IT COMES ABOUT

How does this specialized language come into being. This particular brand of esoteria is probably no different from many others in the whys and wherefores of its development. The primary aim of a special language is to prove to the communi-

cants that they are something special in their own right and do not have to concern themselves with the exalted group that has excluded them. Just as normal youngsters develop "pig Latin" to demonstrate their superiority over the grown-ups, just as the musicians develop "jive talk" to separate themselves from the "long hair," just as the negro develops a special language to demonstrate a special knowledge not available to the non-accepting dominant culture, just as the narcotic addict develops a language that puts him apart from and above the non-user, just so the delinquent group develops its specialized language that excludes the law-abiding, the society-ridden and the meek conformist. In addition, the language serves to accentuate the psychological boundary between the group and the non-group. (The term "group" is used here to denote delinquency as a whole—for although two individuals may belong to different more-or-less organized subgroups, in the face of organized society or authority, e.g., policemen, they will be united by their delinquent identifications.)

WHAT KEEPS IT GOING?

It is rather easy to see how a youngster would keep returning to the group, especially initially, for the group supplies one of the seemingly basic needs, that of belonging.

However, we see youths returning time after time to delinquent groups. Why should this be? Let us look at a youth returning to free society after having been segregated because of misbehavior; he is something of an outcast from the point of view of the "respectable" elements of the community and a hero to fellow delinquents. This occurs if the individual has not been removed for too long a period and if he returns to his home community. Delinquent language, as an outward sign of delinquent identification, serves to increase the distance between the delinquent and the community at large. The extent to which he has

¹ JOHNSON, WENDELL. *YOUR MOST ENCHANTED LISTENER*, Harpers, N. Y., p. 17, 1956.

learned the unique language during his period of incarceration or the extent to which he retains the elements of this communication process that he may have had prior to his incarceration, to that extent will he be identified by society with the less desirable group. The individual delinquent, then, has a difficult time changing his identifications to more acceptable groups, even if he desires to do so. He is not welcome in the homes of his less delinquent companions for parents do not want any boys around "who talk like that." Made extremely uncomfortable by his attempts to gain acceptance into more socially conforming circles, he becomes discouraged and disgusted and he returns to delinquent companions and activities.

Working from the individual toward the group, we see in looking over case histories of delinquents, that many of them have never found any real satisfactions of an emotional nature within the family groupings. Broken families characterize the histories of a great many delinquents. This fact, in itself, suggests emotional disharmony that makes the possibility of acceptance rather remote. The youths, themselves, see the split-up of the parents, or the desertion of one parent, unconsciously, as a rejection of them as individuals. The parent with whom the child stays is often unconsciously rejecting (sometimes openly rejecting but most often over-indulgent) because the child is a reminder of the offending spouse. What then is the child who feels rejected and unaccepted to do? As he grows older his mobility increases, and he is soon in active search of someone who will accept him. He feels uncomfortable with members of his peer group who have the advantages of an accepting family. Where then can he turn? He must turn to others like himself; individuals who have been unaccepted by their parents or who have been outcast from society.

With the delinquent group the individual gains acceptance. The behavior that may have caused him difficulty with society or his parents now insures his acceptance by the group. He quickly becomes adept in the use of the special language which serves as a badge of his belongingness. He gets "wised-up," "in the know." He becomes different from the "lame," the "Square-John."

For the youth who has been out of circulation for a long period or who is placed, upon his release from an institution, into a new situation, the delinquent language which he talks and with which he thinks is an even greater barrier. Finding that society has changed more than he had expected, he

is bewildered. Often without friends, he reaches out to others only to find that he is often misunderstood; little wonder, since he is speaking what is essentially a foreign language. What is perhaps worse, he finds that he has difficulty in understanding what others are trying to communicate to him. What can he do? To whom can he turn for understanding companionship? Obviously, the only persons who understand him easily are those individuals who have gone through experiences similar to his, who "talk the same language." This factor alone is one of the greatest contributing elements in the high rate of returns to institutions of youths released to independent placements. For as surely as the individual is forced to associate himself with other delinquents, his thoughts turn to vindictive, anti-social activities to "get even" with that segment of society that has failed to understand him.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS TO MODIFY THE TOTAL PICTURE?

From some of the statements that have been made, the possibility emerges that perhaps one avenue for communication with these youths might be to learn the esoteric language so that communication will become more direct and meaningful. This has been expressed indirectly by many treatment-oriented disciplines as "working with the individual at his own level" or "starting with the individual where he is." The dangers of such a procedure have also been discussed in the literature. The usual objection is that the delinquent fails to see the treatment person as an authority figure but rather as a fellow delinquent who "has a nice racket." This makes very difficult the hoped-for generalization, "This guy is an understanding fellow, he is an authority figure, perhaps other authority figures are understanding also."² Another danger that it seems appropriate to emphasize here, is that communicating with the delinquent in his own idiom perpetuates the usage of the language form and the thought processes that grow out of this form of communication. In falling in with the delinquent in the utilization of this form of transmission of ideas that is not acceptable to the more conforming elements of society, the treatment person is seen by the delinquent as giving sanction for the continuation of the use of the delinquent language.

It is felt that nearly the exact opposite approach

² SHERRIFFS, ALEX C., *Authority in the Client-Worker Relationship: Asset or Liability?*, FEDERAL PROBATION, June, 1953.

is a better plan of attack. That is, that each and every authority figure coming into contact with the delinquent should make every effort to interpret the picturesque speech into conventional communication symbols. This may be of some assistance in leading the individual toward more usual forms of thought expression. Even if the procedure is totally ineffective in this regard, it has the negative value of at least not perpetuating the delinquent form of speech. This method of dealing with the delinquent, it is felt, should be applied by all, the arresting officer, the correctional officers, as well as people more nominally concerned with the correctional-treatment process. It is interesting to note in this regard that a regular part of the in-service training program required of all new employees of the California Medical Facility, Vacaville, California, an institution utilizing intensive group psychotherapy in the treatment of the seriously disturbed adult male offender, but which is also vitally concerned with the development of a "therapeutic atmosphere" or "therapeutic community," stresses quite strongly the desirability of using proper English in conversation with inmates and avoiding the pitfall of delinquent language with its tendency to be seen by inmates as delinquent identification.³

With the rapid spread of group processes in treatment with delinquents, group therapy and group counseling, it seems appropriate to devote special notice to this area. Effective treatment of offenders will probably (one might say, necessarily) bring about a change in language patterns of the individuals involved. Usually this comes about through group pressures growing out of some recognition on the part of the group of principles that have been discussed here. Sometimes the understanding is vague, and seldom is there any clear statement of the relationship between delinquent language and delinquent behavior. More often, language changes come about because the group is striving for social acceptability and there is a recognition that the type of speech they often or commonly use to communicate their thoughts and feelings is not of a socially acceptable variety. Often, however, a brief and fairly simple discussion by the group leader or counselor at an appropriate time (and the appropriate occasions arise with great frequency when the group is composed of youthful delinquents) will speed up the awareness

³ Personal conversation with LT. MURRAY, In-service Training Officer, California Medical Facility, Vacaville, Calif. Nov., 1957.

of the group regarding the extent to which they utilize delinquent ideation and communication.

In connection with the discussion of group counseling, the role of the leader perhaps needs some clarification. Why is a leader necessary? What are his functions? To explore this completely would be outside the scope of this paper, but one aspect of the role of the leader is of utmost importance to the topic under scrutiny. The important aspect is that the group leader represents an authority figure, which implies that, psychologically, certain kinds of communication take place when he is present that are different from the kinds that go on in his absence.⁴ In other words, it is not a "bull session" among members of a peer group. Thus, if the group leader maintains a consistent stand on the language factor, mostly by example, and gives even minimal support to clearer, less delinquent communication, the group will soon be working to develop controls in this area.

Nothing presented here is meant to imply that the counselor should hold himself aloof and speak only in stilted English or fail to respond if the delinquent can communicate with him only in the language form under discussion. Quite the contrary, the people intimately involved in the treatment process should make every effort to acquaint themselves with as much of the "folklore" of the delinquent as possible. The understanding thus gained can be utilized in translating some of the delinquent's ideas into more socially acceptable terms, often with an increase in the understanding of many aspects of the communicated material.

SUMMARY

The importance of communication symbols as related to the thinking process has been discussed. The special importance of this relationship when applied to delinquent communication, which is seen as one of the outward signs of acceptance by delinquent out-groups, has been emphasized. The development of the esoteric language has been explored to some extent. The role of incarceration in the development of the special language has been pointed out, as well as the effects this may have upon the individual at the time of his return to free society. Some ideas on what can be done to

⁴ MAIER, NORMAN R. F. AND SOLEM, ALLEN R. *The Contribution of a Discussion Leader to the Quality of Group Thinking. The Effective Use of Minority Opinions.* HUMAN RELATIONS, 1952, 5, 277-288.

modify the speech patterns of delinquent youths have been suggested. Cautions have also been given as to some procedures that might possibly prove to be harmful.

If we wish to modify delinquent behavior we must change delinquent thinking. One way to deal

with thought processes is through the tools of thinking—words. In view of this, it would seem appropriate to devote considerable effort, through whatever means we can devise, toward the elimination of delinquent language, especially in institutional settings.