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Making Sense: Changing Futures for Families

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Our rulers, who rule our symbols, and so rule a symbolic class of life, impose their own infantilism on our institutions, educational methods, and doctrines.

This leads to nervous maladjustment of the incoming generations which, being born into, are forced to develop under the un-natural (for man) semantic conditions imposed on them.

Albert Korzybski

When one identifies populations, one automatically takes the chance of releasing labels that excuse responsibility, release shame, appropriate blame, and release all kinds of static evaluation. The problem involved in this discussion belongs to our culture and the English language we speak, not to the population that is the focus of this presentation. The population is showing the stress of being in the third or fourth generation of dysfunction that has traveled down through their linguistic heritage.

The discussion today has nothing to do with the survival of the fittest; in fact, Modern Linguistic Determinism refers to the idea that, to some extent, the language we use, determines the way in which we view and think about the world around us. (Campbell, 1997). The population may make more semantic errors than other populations; but, for the most part can recognize that what they is not necessarily what they mean, if they are questioned. Wisdom potential, missing in this population, may be only lying dormant waiting to be released.

General Semantics is appropriated as part of a restorative treatment program for family systems with generational legacies of dysfunction in which the Linguistic legacy effects human development. The families learn in a semantically controlled environment and use linguistically

sound concepts to normalize their interactions. The treatment program is called *Uncapping Family Wisdom: Recognizing, Treating and Reconciling Trans-Generational Dysfunction*. The presentation shows how potential is limited as dysfunction travels down the family speaking pattern, limiting potential, and wreaking havoc through the language of the family. As a part of a self-evaluative treatment program, participating families identify the semantic errors in their family speaking pattern and learn how their language may not always make sense, causing frustration, then conflict.

What characteristics does a family have when the third and fourth generations have missed basic conceptual information necessary to prosper spiritually, mentally, and many times physically? What can be done to change the future for these families?

Characteristics of the Population

Some individuals are born into families that have severe gaps in their informational base. The indications of this condition are want, need, shame and loss. Korzybski, (2002) commented:

The “normal child” profits by experience and outgrows the semantic characteristics that are characteristic at a given age. In the case of arrested development, the undesirable infantile characteristics persist. In cases of arrested development... are a source of endless difficulties and suffering to them and to their associates.

The individuals in these populations spend their life looking for answers or just trying to adjust to difficult circumstances. Others with different legacies, with less severe gaps in their informational base, do not have to search to a comparable degree because they were born into a family system that had the needed conceptual information, which supplied them with a menu of possibilities and choice.

How all this works in childhood psychotherapy is still under investigation. Over the past decades, research into early parent-child attachment has stimulated general interest in the roles of relational processes and internalized representational systems as the bases for understanding continuities and discontinuities in psychopathology over time and across generations. (Lyon-Ruth, 1995). In an article in *Developmental Psychology*, the question was asked “Can we reintroduce relational strategies and implicit representational systems to the study of psychopathology?” The answer is “Yes, but in a much more implicit way than has been done in the past.” We can move past just observation on to concrete measures. The way of which I speak is to identify family speaking patterns that effect human development through concepts from the field of Linguistics and General Semantics. The intervention is a family system, not only an intervention for the individual in the family system.

How Big is This Population?

How big is the population? Before the 2005 hurricane disasters, families with children constituted approximately 40 percent of the urban homeless population (U.S. Conference of Mayors). Homeless children constituted 39 percent (Urban Institute), the fastest growing segment, of that population. In prison populations, two thirds of the women and more than half of the men are parents of children younger than 18 years of age. (Hagan, 1995, p. 1), accounting for 826,000 children in a state of crisis understanding that a father’s or mother’s imprisonment can be the final, lethal blow to an already weakened family structure (Women’s Prison Association, 1995).

Trans-Generational Dysfunction

Trans-Generational Dysfunction is a growing phenomenon found in most environments and virtually every social stratum to some degree. All of us here most have a degree of trans-Generational Dysfunction, or else why would we be interested in General Semantics?

Trans-Generational Dysfunction refers to configurations of dysfunction, which limit the potential for human development and are passed down through verbal and non-verbal linguistic patterns in family systems and cultural meanings. For our purposes now, we will look at extremely visible examples. Trans-generational Dysfunction is especially visible in alternative school settings, court-ordered counseling situations, migrating populations, rehabilitation centers, homeless shelters, and prisons. Families with recidivism features increase the opportunity to study the progression of Trans-Generational Dysfunction.

These families are in need of a systemized exposure to conceptual information, which will aid in the quest for optimal human development for all. A framework is needed so that linguistic and semantic legacies that affect development can be understood and overcome, because speech patterns travel through the language of the family. Anthropological psycholinguistics, particularly the work of Whorf and Sapir (Whorf, 1976), stated that the language one spoke shaped one's personal experience of the world. In other words, language defined reality for the speakers.

Many families have inherited a speaking pattern that distorts reality for the family. The adults in these families, through their inherited language patterns, do not always know how to instill in their offspring the basic concepts and affirmations considered necessary for optimal moral, cognitive, social, and psychological development. The adults may not have passed through the developmental stages themselves. Unfortunately, in many cases, the language the children hear from significant others in times of early development largely determines the potential for the development of these children. The children hear and learn defective language patterns, ensuring further dysfunction in succeeding generations if intervention is not forthcoming. According to Bentoven (1992), because of the emotional pain incurred in the interactions in dysfunctional families, these families become trauma organized due to the pattern of organization called Trans-Generational Dysfunction.

The Language Patterns Found in Trans-Generational Dysfunction

Linking the information on linguistics to developmental tasks is imperative if the parents are to learn how to give permission to develop to their offspring and to receive these permissions themselves. The formation of language and the concepts in the language occur simultaneously with the developmental stage formations for children. The children need to receive information on trust, personhood, initiative, and conscience building in early stage formation. If the developing child is denied stage development permissions by use of an inherited style of speaking, in all probability, there will be a developmental stage arrest or arrests in early childhood.

A Program for Trans-Generational Dysfunction

Uncapping Family Wisdom: A Program for Recognizing, Treating and Reconciling Trans-Generational Dysfunction is based on the permissions for development which normally occur in the language of the speakers of Acrolect, the highest form of standard English which was observed by the Socio-Linguists Basil Bernstein, from England and John Nist, from the U.S. (See Slides) John Nist (1974) noted that the vehicle for transmitting culture is language. In the Uncapping Family Wisdom Treatment Program the participants are invited to see how culture has influenced them. This serves two purposes: it bypasses the shame factor by placing allowing the environment to shoulder some responsibly and teaches the participants how culture is an influencing factor. To understand that they can influence culture for good empowers the families. John Nist (1974) noticed something was unusual in the language of the disadvantaged. The language of the socially disadvantaged excelled in communicating information about concrete subjects and stereotyped social situations, but was deficient in expressing abstractions and subtle distinctions of feelings. The process of events was not expressed in conversations; therefore, the process likely was not understood. Nist's observations point out a lack of understanding of cause and effect and a limited feeling vocabulary.

The program, based on the concepts found in this lect, has a positive premise that latent wisdom resides in the family system and barriers can be removed to release the inherent family wisdom. Three steps are necessary to uncap the latent family wisdom.

1. The family learns in a safe community environment, with healthy norms maintained by the therapist, which mimics an Acrolet community where cultural information would have normally be acquired.
2. The family assesses how the family presently is able to cooperate in twelve different categories.
3. The family, which incrementally acquires information and determines the desired changes they would like to make, are given exercises which enable them to reason and select choices for their family.

Let us look at some case studies in the Uncapping Family Wisdom Program to understand the direct application of General Semantic principles in this treatment program.

Case Studies

Case Study Research 1

Amy was a 15-year-old female who was admitted to a children's treatment center under the auspices of the Department of Human Services. As part of her treatment, the family was invited for family community where General Semantics training was part of the interventions in the program. The patient was caught in a difficult position. She innocently reported that her brother-in-law had done an illegal act, something that parties involved including her stepfather, mother, brother-in-law, and sister insisted were "crazy" accusations. The personnel at the Department of Human Services and the prosecuting attorney were convinced the patient was telling the truth. The prosecuting attorney agreed to call her during a therapy session. He was supportive and the patient

related she was glad others believed her. The prosecuting attorney stated he strongly suspected the brother-in-law was into heavy drug trafficking and he felt the patient was in danger.

The hospital staff also believed the patient. She did not exhibit any lying behavior while in the hospital. No medical or psychological reason existed to keep her in the hospital. Most of the staff felt the personnel at the Department of Human Services had brought her in for protective reasons hoping hospital staff could persuade her to go to a foster placement. The nursing staff was trained in General Semantics to intervene in the severe Allness, Sign-Symbol Confusion and Dead-level Reckoning in the family dynamics.

Family Semantic Evaluation

Unfortunately, the family was closed and declined to self- evaluate their speech communication patterns in an assessment. Observation of speech and interpersonal verbal and nonverbal action between the mother and the patient was a prime consideration of the therapist during the family therapy. Static Evaluation, Allness, and Dead-Level Reckoning were the primary speech patterns in these meetings. In this case the nurses and staff who came in contact with the patient agreed to be trained in General Semantic Principles for this case and learned especially how to identify and respond to Static Evaluation, Allness and Dead-Level Reckoning. The patient had some traits of Schizoid Personality Disorder. She did not connect with the other patients, but was content to be in the same room with them, staying calm in her circle of privacy. She almost always chose solitary activities. She also showed separation anxiety being away from her mother. The family dynamics had contributed to arrested development in the young woman and a specialized environment was set up surrounding the patient with positive, healthy semantics, which served to electrify her development and teach her to respond to the semantic error in her family. The atmosphere served as a stable object relations environment. As the day came for Amy to leave the hospital, the staff had real misgivings about her safety, as did the prosecuting attorney,

and the county social service officers. No interference was possible because Amy still wanted to go with her mother, and her mother was taking her home. The staff had done all they knew to do. Amy had to decide to use her skills she had learned in the hospital setting and use her developmental permissions. The staff realized Amy would have to choose to grow up.

Two and one half weeks later, the social worker in her home county called to relate Amy had called and asked to be picked up and put in foster placement. She continued the legal action against her brother-in-law and he eventually was found guilty and was sent to prison. Amy surrounded by General Semantics during treatment used the stable environment to pass through developmental arrest and make sense of her world.

Case Study Research 2

Charles,¹ 45 years old, came to a seminar with his third wife, Susan, who was interested in getting help with their blended family. As time passed, it was apparent Charles played an important role in each one of the individual cases. Over a period of four years the therapist had treated all of the adults and children in his former marriage and in his present marriage. He was the main father figure for most of the children and step-children. He was a powerful man, an executive in a large merchandizing establishment. He appeared to have Narcissistic Personality² traits.

Charles was invited to several sessions with different members of his family over this period. The therapist was careful not to shame or blame him, seeing his involvement, financially and relationally, as critical to several children and adults, even though at times his behavior was

1. Details such as names, age and identifying matter have been in accordance with case study ethical methods.

² Narcissistic Personality Disorder has a cardinal feature of self-centeredness. Strong entitlement issues give the person a sense of deserving special privileges and adoration from others. The person expects to be treated better than others are treated. Relationships are seen entirely in terms of what others can offer. A lack of objectivity, arrogance, insensitivity, and exploitative behavior are common. A Narcissistic Personality resents any failure to immediately and totally gratify his or her needs and usually has along history of erratic relationships. Persons with this disorder had a fragile self-esteem and responded to criticism with rage, despair, or cool nonchalance. (Zuckerman 1993, 188.)

very harsh and inappropriate with the children. The dynamics of the various relationships were discussed with him, along with the feelings of the family members in treatment. He came to the sessions and listened, never voicing an opinion; however, he did change some behavior at the therapist's request. The emotionally-charged power of Charles' speech pattern left little room for real reasoning. He was cognitively well-developed and made good decisions at his place of employment; however, even good reasoning at his place of employment was clouded by his need to control at all times. In cases where violence, power, and control issues are involved, and/or when problems with addictions are present, the dysfunctional family system has to change before the powerful person will change. In this case, the process for this family took over four years before the system became healthy enough to unify in addressing the inappropriate behavior of a powerful member. Humor, a powerful healthy defense mechanism, combined with non-judgmental truthfulness, was used to defuse difficult situations.

Family Semantic Evaluation

Charles and Susan, his third wife, had evaluated their speech patterns in the first seminar meeting with a large group/ small group format, with the family forming the small group. Susan, having the best social skills, had shared with the group at large. Charles had a speech pattern like the uncle who had raised him. It was his way or no way. Extreme Polarization, Fact-Inference Confusion, and Dead-Level Reckoning were strong indicators of developmental arrest. Male power and control were the ultimate goal. Charles resented the pattern in his uncle and did not like the fact that he was continuing the legacy. He did not know another way of handling the powerful emotions behind the need to control.

The future was predictable, if the behavioral dynamic remained unchanged. The children would probably choose between the two adult models polarized in the home. Although no one would want to behave in inappropriate ways as Charles did many times, the children only saw two

models from which to choose - the verbal abuser or the non-person. Invariably, at least one would pick up the polarization speech pattern and victimize others, subconsciously deciding not to be the victim.

His Fact-Inference Confusion was extreme. Charles did not follow a normal processing of facts through a fact, inference, opinion, and judgment cycle. He jumped from facts to judgments accompanied by direct hits of verbal abuse, aiming for character insults, rather than commenting on behavior. He often accelerated into rage. Amnesia was a byproduct of his raging, and he often wondered why everyone was so distant. This led to further judgment leading to more feelings of abandonment, a consequence of his behavior. Fear of abandonment led to even more controlling behavior. His statements of judgment were always just below the surface frequently saying things like, "You are the laziest kid I have ever seen."

"My way is the way. You want to do things your way, see if you can take my job." Statements like these showed his skill at Dead-Level Reckoning and Polaration. He cognitively development was advanced and made good decisions at his place of employment; however, even good reasoning at his place of employment was clouded by his need to control at all times. The undercurrent of Dead-Level Reckoning reinforced Charles' egocentrism. Conversations with Charles were so that circumstantial others lost interest. He avoided responsibility by sidetracking the issues during conversations and then became too busy to cooperate until later. Later never came. He did not encourage dialogue by using eye contact; he appeared uninterested frustrating the other person, who would end up doing the job himself or herself.

Working together, this family system learned General Semantic words to make sense of the painful dynamics in the family. Charles speech patterns were too overpowering for the individuals of the family, but equipping the family as a system to state vocally what was happened helped the family work toward normalcy.

Conclusions

These two cases illustrate the problems Korybski stressed in his writings, as he discussed the problems of the incoming generations that were born into and were forced to develop under the un-natural semantic conditions imposed on them. Because of the General Semantic interventions, a new environment was able to be created that sparked the human development in these families.

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