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ABSTRACT

A course was designed to examine the use of role playing as an inter-ethnic communication technique to isolate community and institutionally based ethnic problems unique to a particular situation. Three groups were formed, each group generally composed of 30% Anglo, 30% Black, and 30% Chicano. The educational backgrounds of the individuals in the groups ranged from high school freshman to masters degree level. The ages ranged from 14 years to 52 years, and there was generally an equal number of women and men. Isolation of the ethnic communications problems unique to each class was obtained by use of open-ended discussions. The groups then chose one of the problems and fit it into a role playing scenario context using five criteria: (1) identify the nature of the problem; (2) identify the basic symbolic processes operating within the problem; (3) arrange the problem and its symbolic functions into a scenario; (4) create roles which could be enacted; and (5) use an ethnic aide in creating communication strategies. The resultant data indicate that role playing is effective in creating more understanding of the feelings and needs of the ethnic peoples involved in inter-ethnic communication problems. (TS)

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SCENARIO ROLE-PLAYING AS
A MEANS TO INTER-ETHNIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

One of the major communication concerns faced by speech communication departments of higher education is the community based inter-ethnic communication problems in urban settings. Sometimes in our search for more effective means of human understanding, we fail to recognize the uniqueness of established communication techniques. However, with some innovative modifications in application, these techniques can serve a definite need in revitalizing human communication. One of these is theatre. Specifically scenario role-playing as a means to inter-ethnic communication can be an effective way to meet the challenge of inter-ethnic understanding in urban settings. This paper reports on the use of this technique in an inter-ethnic community situation.

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Rationale

One of America's unique cultural aspects is concern for the communicative expression of the individual. Our various political and governmental processes have been devised to protect the right of each of our citizens to practice freedom of speech. For nearly two hundred years this seemingly untenable technique continues to function, even if haphazardly at times.

Today, however, freedom of speech seems to be disfunctioning for certain members of our society. Minority groups are beginning to question the workability of free expression. They are beginning to wonder if the sanction of free speech is reserved mostly for the Anglo majority. To them, the Anglo needs and wants seem to be heard much more readily within our democratic processes than theirs are. Consequently, these minority groups have been relegated to a position of disenfranchised citizens, alienated from our free expression processes so vital to their needs of self-identification and group actualization within the larger cultural heritage of our country. These citizens have been placed in an environment of societal isolation in the ghetto,

the barrio, and on the reservation, and the frustrations they feel have exploded across the land in incidents like Watts, Harlem, Detroit, etc.. These activities have tended to polarize ethnic groups even more, and the call is heard once more in ever resounding tones--"We must communicate more with each other. We must find ways to open new techniques of human expression within and between ethnic groups."

There is nothing new here, except the communicative perspective has changed. It has moved from a broad, national context to a more limited, more specific ethnic context. This is frightening to us at times because we are reluctant to change our ways in dealing with it. But the societal needs of our time insist on communicative techniques which will open up ways for more responsive understanding within and between ethnic groups.

Sometimes in our search for more effective means of human understanding, we fail to recognize the uniqueness of established communication techniques. We take them for granted because we cannot see them as workable outside of their established uses. But with some innovative modifications in application, these techniques can serve a definite need in revitalizing human communication.

One of these techniques is theatre. In fact, it is man's oldest form of institutionalized communication. Too frequently, we have looked upon theatre as an art form, rather than a human communication process. Basically, this is true. However, theatre has an innate quality that is applicable to definite human communication situations. This quality has a direct relationship to producing a play, and it, also, has a direct relationship to situations in which spontaneous human interaction can be simulated

in a human communication context. This quality is role-playing, but not in the conventional sociological sense of the everyday roles we assume in our normative behavior. Role-playing here means tapping into the innate theatrics of human nature. It means devising situations in which man's capacity to imitate real-life situations can be activated in a human interaction context, and the symbolic processes which play upon that situation can be captured in an ethnic scenario. This is using theatrics in a communicative sense because its main purpose is to reconstruct man in a situation whereby the immediacy of his communicative functions or dysfunctions can be observed by himself and the other people involved in the enacted real-life problems.

Role-playing can be an effective means to tapping into behavioral attributes. Mosnow and Robinson (4) point out that experiments in persuasion have generally supported the proposition that the more actively an individual is involved with the role he is playing and its supportive arguments, the more likely he is to take on the behavioral attitudes associated with the role he is playing.

From the standpoint of learning theory, evidence has shown that the more sense organs of the individual which are activated in the learning process the greater the sensitization of the individual to the sources of information available to him within his immediate environment (3).

Subsequent studies conducted by Hovland et al. (2) found that the more sense organs of the individual activated, i.e. the more message channels used by the individual, the more information he can receive from his surrounding environment.

Dale(1) maintains that the use of dramatizations is a good means to effective communication because the vividness of

dramatized human experiences heightens the intensity of the messages by involving the participants in the total context of theatrics. It has a way of taking its participants into the very essence of their total environment by merely capitalizing on their natural impulses to imitate human behavior through role-playing.

The evidence seems to support the contention that theatrics and role-playing may be viewed as a vehicle which reflects human social conditions and cultural values, and that it, also, may be viewed as a medium which imparts this social and cultural information to the individual in a communication context. This paper will report on the use of theatrics and role-playing as an inter-ethnic communication technique in an experimental course taught by the author entitled "Communication Problems in Ethnic Groups" at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

The Approach

Specifically, the course was offered by the Speech Communication Department through University extension. It was designed to isolate community and/or institutionally based ethnic problems unique to a particular situation, and it attempted to apply communication techniques within the framework of the ethnicity of that particular situation. The course has been taught three times to three distinct groups: (1) selected staff and inmates of the Paso Robles School for Boys of the California Youth Authority, (2) Teacher Internship Trainees for Migrant Education, and (3) selected staff, teachers and parents of the Santa Maria School District, Santa Maria, California. In each teaching situation, a random mix of ethnic backgrounds was attained between Anglos,

Blacks, and Chicanos. This mix was assigned as intact groups by the institutions involved, and the make-up of each group generally followed a 30% Anglo, 30% Black and 30% Chicano breakdown. The educational backgrounds of the individuals in the groups ranged from high school freshman to Masters Degree level. Their ages ranged from 14 years to 52 years, and there was an almost even split on sex--52% males and 48% females.

Isolation of the ethnic communications problem areas unique to each class was obtained by the use of open-ended discussions. Each class decided on five problem areas, and ranked them in importance from one through five. Data on the effectiveness of the use of role-playing and theatrics as a communication technique for inter-ethnic problems was obtained by an after-only questionnaire.

Basically the format for each of the ethnic communication problem areas for each class followed the same procedure. Participants in each of the three classes were divided into five groups, for a total of 15 groups overall. Each group contained six individuals, with an equal mix of males-females as was possible in the total make-up of each class. All the groups in each of the classes chose one of the selected ethnic communication problem areas. Special interest in the problem by the group members was the primary selection criteria.

Once an ethnic communication problem area was selected by a group, its members had to fit it into a role-playing scenario context. To do this, they had to establish the following criteria:

- (1) identify the exact nature of the ethnic based communication problem.

- (2) identify the basic symbolic processes operating within the ethnic based communication problem.
- (3) arrange the ethnic based communication problem and its basic symbolic functions into a dramatized scenario.
- (4) create essential roles which could be enacted within the dramatized scenario.
- (5) use an ethnic aide in creating communication strategies.

A Case in Point

It is not possible here to elaborate on all of the ethnic based communication problems investigated in each of the classes. For brevity, let us look at a particular problem to see how the established criteria operated.

This particular problem occurred in an elementary school in the Santa Maria School District. The school had a student enrollment of about 40% Chicanos, with the rest of the student body Anglos. The crux of the problem involved a number of Chicano students and three or four of the Anglo teachers. It seems that the teachers complained that the Chicano students were disrespectful to them, and the Chicano students stated that the teachers were indifferent toward them. Repeated discussions between the administration, the teachers and the students involved were not fruitful in identifying the cause of the problem. Eventually, the situation reached an impasse. The Chicano students' parents boycotted the school, refusing to send their children back until the teachers involved were fired. At a meeting with the school board, the people involved agreed that the Chicano students would return to school if more effective means of understanding between ethnic groups would be established.

With this background information, the group reconstructing

this ethnic communication problem had to first identify the exact nature of the problem. They did this in two phases. The first phase was a discussion among the group members, composed of two of the Anglo teachers involved in the situation, two of the Chicano parents also involved in the situation, and two Blacks not involved in the situation. In phase two, the group interviewed selected people, teachers, administrators, students, and parents knowledgeable about the situation. On the basis of the information gathered, the group members decided that the exact nature of the problem involved certain ethnic misconceptions of both the Anglo and the Chicano cultural heritage in teaching children respect for adults. The crux of the situation was a matter of eye contact. When reprimanded by the Anglo teachers, the Chicano students looked at the floor, instead of looking them in the eye. The teachers interpreted this as disrespect, when actually it was a show of respect for adult authority by the Chicano students.

The same technique previously used to identify the exact nature of the problem was used to identify the basic symbolic functions operating within the ethnic based communication problem. The group found that two basic symbolic functions were causing the ethnic misconceptions. One was a bilingual malfunction. The Anglo teachers knew very little Spanish, and the Chicano students had a limited facility with English. This bilingual difficulty helped to create the second ethnic misconception--misunderstandings over bicultural societal values. The Chicano students were operating from Spanish folk societal value concepts, and the teachers were operating from Anglo middle-class societal value concepts.

At this point, the group decided that an outside person, not

involved with the group problem, was needed to assist them in establishing a more indepth understanding of the two basic ethnic misconceptions. This person had to have a workable fluency in both the English and Spanish languages, including an understanding of the societal value concepts of the two distinct ethnic groups. This person was called an ethnic aide. Through the efforts of the school administration, a person was secured from the community who served as the ethnic aide for the group.

The next step in the process was to reconstruct the problem in a scenario context. With the help of the ethnic aide, the group established a role-playing format, including the various roles to be enacted, with a loosely constructed scheme of the spoken dialogue both in Spanish and in English. It should be pointed out here that a scenario is an outline of a dramatic action, starting with a basic human situation, intensified by complications, which must be resolved in some way through human interaction. The dialogue is primarily spontaneous, however certain cue lines can be written out and memorized by the role-players so that the dramatic action can progress to an ultimate conclusion. In a bilingual-bicultural situation, it is essential that the dialogue be in both languages if the role-players are to acquire a greater appreciation of the intrinsic feelings and modes of expression inherent in each language. Here the ethnic aide was very helpful in assisting the role-players to learn some basic communication aspects of a language unfamiliar to them. Specifically, an Anglo teacher, playing the role of a Chicano parent, would work from a written script until she learned the Spanish expressions. Once she learned the expressions, she could converse in Spanish. Likewise, the Chicano parent would follow the same procedure in English. The

ethnic aide would assist the role-players in any language pronunciation, rhythm or meaning difficulties encountered in the role-playing situation.

The same technique was used in the scenario context. For example, one scenario involved the Anglo teacher reprimanding the Chicano student. The first run through was straight. A Chicano from the group would role-play the student, and an Anglo from the group would be the teacher. Next the situation was reversed. The Chicano would play the teacher speaking English, and the Anglo would play the student speaking Spanish. The ethnic aide would assist the role-players until they had reached a level of proficiency to carry on by themselves. Each scenario was observed by the group; and when it was concluded, the group and the ethnic aide discussed the significant bilingual-bicultural aspects to ascertain where communication breakdowns occurred. One of the important bicultural aspects which came out of this scenario was a societal value concept. Group members began to realize that the Chicano child's authority concept was different than the Anglo child's authority concept. In the Spanish folk society, the father is dominant, and the mother is submissive. Children are taught respect for both, but the mother has a special place. She, and females in general, are to be shielded, protected, especially by the males. The authority figure is the father. Males must be strong and resolute, and the Chicano children are taught to respond primarily to male authority, rather than female authority. On the other hand, middle-class Anglo children are raised in a partnership authority concept. The mother makes as many decisions as the father, and women, in general, are not as protected in a

traditional sense as Chicano women are. Here women have a much stronger authority concept. Therefore, at times it is difficult for Chicano children to respond favorably to the female teacher authority image in the classroom. Female Anglo teachers may misinterpret the deference accorded them by Chicano children as a sign of disrespect, indifference, or even rudeness, especially if they do not look them in the eye when reprimanded.

This is only one of the ethnic misconceptions with subsequent communication breakdown illuminated by this approach. Others could be listed here, i.e. the box-toed shoes worn by many Chicanos as a vestige of the days of the caballeros, not the "greaser" image it is supposed to represent, or the physical touching even among male Chicanos, as normative behavior rather than supposed "effeminacy." However, this should give us an overview of this inter-ethnic communication technique and how it can operate within a community framework.

Results

As previously stated in this paper, an after-only questionnaire was used in this study. It was decided to use this method to cut down on subject sensitization and to catch them at the height of their involvement in the technique so the impact of its effectiveness could be fully ascertained. The findings, in percentages, are listed below.

One of the important aspects of this study was to determine its overall effectiveness as an inter-ethnic communication technique. Table 1 reports the findings below.

Table 1. Percentages and frequency of subjects reporting on the overall effectiveness of the approach as an inter-ethnic communication technique.

| Ethnic Group | Approach | | | |
|--------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | Effective Yes | Effective % | Not Effective No | Not Effective % |
| Anglo | 26 | 27.5 | 4 | 2.3 |
| Black | 24 | 25.3 | 3 | 2.2 |
| Chicano | 31 | 33.1 | 2 | 2.1 |
| Total | 81 | 85.9 | 9 | 6.6 |

N=90

We, also would like to know how effective the approach was in the subjects everyday contact involving communication problems with ethnic peoples. Table 2 reports this.

Table 2. Percentages and frequency of subjects reporting on the effectiveness of the approach in their everyday contacts involving communication problems with ethnic peoples.

| Ethnic Group | Approach | | | |
|--------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | Effective Yes | Effective % | Not Effective No | Not Effective % |
| Anglo | 18 | 19.6 | 15 | 11.1 |
| Black | 19 | 20.2 | 7 | 5.2 |
| Chicano | 23 | 24.3 | 8 | 5.9 |
| Total | 60 | 64.1 | 30 | 22.2 |

N=90

Finally it is important to determine the effectiveness of the approach in helping to solve community based inter-ethnic communication problems. We would like to know the subjects reactions to its actual use in their own communities. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Percentages and frequency of subjects reporting on the effectiveness of the approach in actual use in their own communities.

| Ethnic Group | Approach | | | |
|--------------|---------------|------|------------------|------|
| | Effective Yes | % | Not Effective No | % |
| Anglo | 10 | 20.2 | 12 | 23.1 |
| Black | 2 | 4.1 | 3 | 5.2 |
| Chicano | 6 | 5.9 | 7 | 6.3 |
| Total | 18 | 30.2 | 22 | 34.6 |

40 Only forty subjects responded to this question. They were directly involved with community problems and, therefore, they could reply to the question from their own experiences in using it.

Conclusion

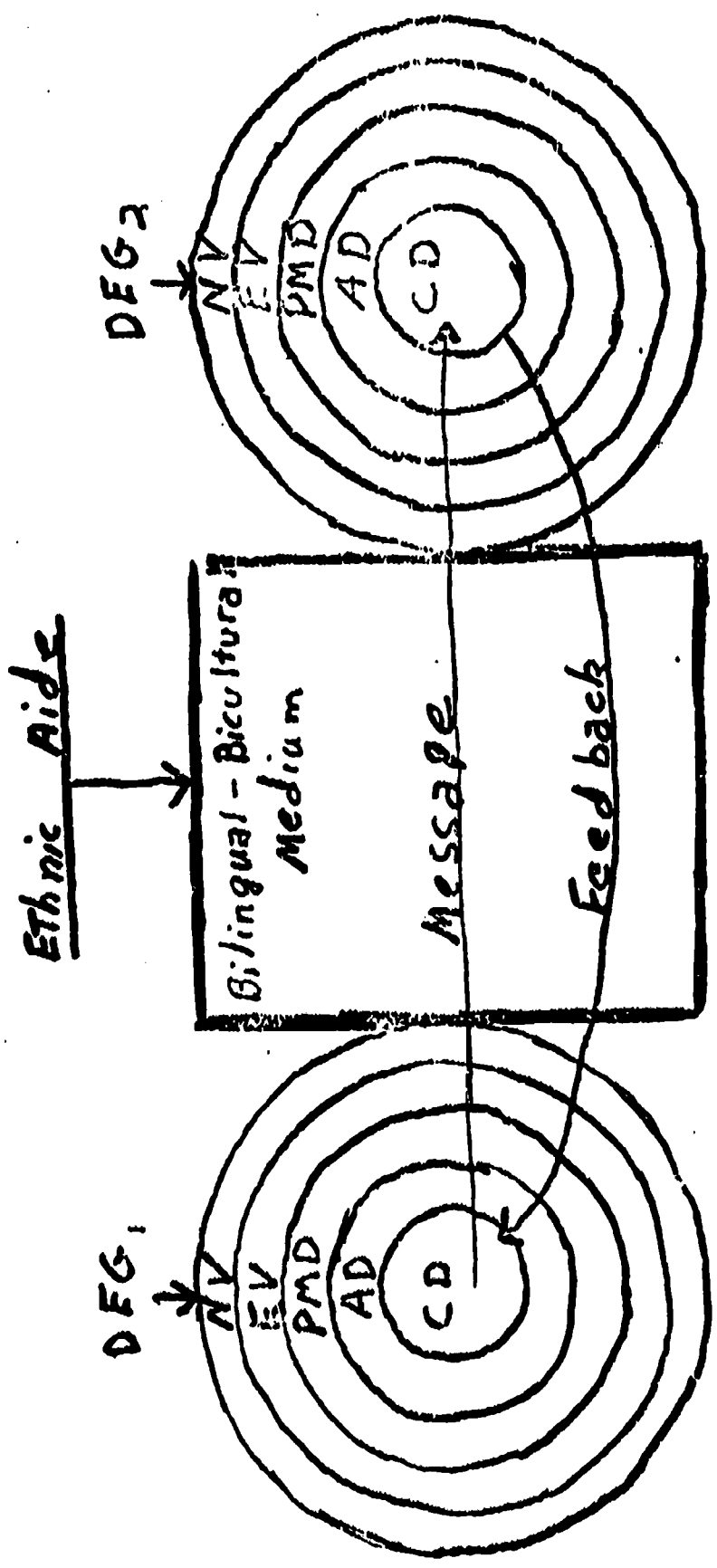
There is no one sure method to approach the problems of inter-ethnic communication. These problems are unique to each community. Variables are different, and social conditions are different. However, the use of role-playing in a scenario context may be one approach to the problem. The data seems to indicate that it is reasonably effective in creating more understanding of the feelings and needs of the ethnic peoples involved in inter-ethnic communication problems. Certainly the approach needs more testing and modification of its technique, so that its ability to take its participants close to the reality of a

communication situation can be more precisely identified and applied in future replications. At least, this is how one university's speech-communication department attempted to meet the needs of the inter-ethnic communication problems within its own jurisdiction. Perhaps other speech-communication departments in other colleges and universities may find it workable for them in their community based ethnic communication problems.

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The BLBC Model of Inter-ethnic Communication



DEG₁ + 2 = Dissimilar ethnic groups

CD = Cognitive domain

AD = Affective domain

PMD = Psycho motor domain

EV = Ethnic values

NV = Nation values