

behavioral sciences

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ALIENATION

Lack of communication deplored

Child psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner believes he discerns another grim trend in American society—decreased socialization of the people with an attendant rise in antisocial behavior.

Dr. Bronfenbrenner, a theorist for the poverty war's Head Start Program and professor at Cornell University, believes broken lines of communication between the generations and between children of different ages are responsible for an increasingly antisocial society.

"If there isn't communication between generations, it is impossible to learn how to cooperate, how to be kind, how to give and receive help," says Dr. Bronfenbrenner. But in current American society there is not only lessening contact between adults and children but between the children themselves. "Older kids are not helping the younger," Dr. Bronfenbrenner declares.

"Our critical problem is segregation, and not just by race but by age and class." In cities, he believes, children no longer know adults in an intimate personal way.

RACE

Negro withdrawal feared

A leading authority on race relations, Dr. Thomas F. Pettigrew of Harvard University, foresees a dangerous consequence of the current race crisis—Negro withdrawal from white society.

Negroes have three alternatives, says Dr. Pettigrew. They can move toward whites, against whites or away from them. Negroes are now in revolt, explains Dr. Pettigrew. "The civil rights movement is in fact dead." But when Negroes find that revolt does not work either, he believes, they will withdraw.

At the individual level, withdrawal will take such forms as alcoholism and drug addiction. At the political level it might take the form of wholly Negro cities. There will no longer be overt violence, at least for a time, Dr. Pettigrew believes, and the tragic thing is that whites will see this situation as an improvement.

Dr. Pettigrew, a consultant with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, believes only one change can block the downward trend in U.S. race relations—the end of the Vietnam war and diversion of national resources to this problem.

He points out that the most tragic riots in U.S. history have occurred during wars or just after wars. War escalates the relative deprivation of different social levels, while the aftermath of war often brings recession with, again, increased relative deprivation.

TRAINING

Gentle threats held most effective

If you want to instill values in children, speak softly and carry a small stick. Big sticks may control behavior, but small sticks change attitudes.

This thesis comes from Dr. Elliot Aronson, a University of Texas psychologist who induced a group of children to turn their backs on toys they really liked and to decide they didn't like them after all.

The technique used was request followed by a mild threat which meant the child had to build his own internal justifications for not playing with toys they liked in order to comply with the request.

Dr. Aronson and colleagues first spent days playing with the children and building rapport. Then, picking out a favorite toy of each child and saying: "If you play with this toy, I will be a little cross with you," they left the room. Other children were more severely threatened with possible loss of all the toys plus their new friends, the experimenters.

In one test of eight-year-olds, one toy was particularly fabulous, Dr. Aronson says. It was a battery-powered robot that threw bombs.

Very few children under mild threat played with that beautiful robot, Dr. Aronson reports. But many of the others did. Two months later, the first group still ignored the robot. That the effect lasted for 60 days is "absolutely phenomenal," Dr. Aronson says, and it indicates a long-term attitude change. He sees no reason why the same effect would not work when dealing with more important values.

BEHAVIORISM

Governments could use reinforcement

Dr. B. F. Skinner of Harvard University has a few suggestions for government based on his theories of reinforcement. Rather than relying primarily on its power to punish—the traditional basis of government—governments could design ways of reinforcing the kinds of behavior they want from citizens. For instance, factories could be set up in ghettos to produce goods the ghetto people are using, thereby reinforcing behavior inconsistent with riots.

"You can't use reinforcement to stop riots," says Dr. Skinner, "but you can reinforce things that are incompatible with riots."

COMPUTER SIMULATION

Human processes may be simple

Successful simulation of human mental processes depends on a crucial question, so far unanswered: Is the mental process inherently complicated or does it only appear complicated because the information coming in is complex?

An ant, for instance, crawling through sand, appears to follow a complicated wiggle-waggle path. The ant's internal program may actually be simple, but the contours of the sand make them seem complex.

Dr. Herbert Simon, leading exponent of computer simulation at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, raised this question in terms of human thought processes.

If human thinking is complex because of what's inside rather than because of what is being scanned, simulation will come to nothing, said Dr. Simon.

But he suspects that many humans use processes no more complicated than those of a literal-minded computer.

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