

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 891

CG 003 157

By-Sarles, Harvey B.

Alternative Therapeutic Strategies With the Urban Negro.

American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

Pub Date 1 Sep 68

Note-11p.; Paper was presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, San Francisco, California, August 30-September 3, 1968.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.65

Descriptors-*Group Behavior, *Group Unity, Negro Culture, *Negroes, Self Concept, *Therapists, *Urban Environment

Social pressures in the United States are explained in the context of group identification and group behavior. The urban scene is made up of a number of groups, or subcultures, which have parallel structures along socio-economic, and nationality-color-ethnic lines. These groups act as if they had a structured plan. It is shown how this plan is formulated, maintained, and passed on. An analysis of the Negroes as a group emphasizes their lack of deep feelings as being members of a Black group. They had defined an essential part of their beings in terms of what they are not. Militancy results because Black is not merely being non-white and such a position splinters the possibility of in group feelings. The difficulties of therapy with a member of this group are discussed in terms of this analysis. (PS)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE
PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION
POSITION OR POLICY.

Alternative Therapeutic Strategies
with the Urban Negro

Harvey B. Sarles, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Minnesota

American Psychological Association
September 1, 1968
San Francisco, California

ED030891

CG 003 157

This summer I have been working for the NIMH in the attempt to organize some future study of urban areas; trying to see, and to foresee the immense pressures for change, reactions to change, and what may result. In a time of rapid change, the therapeutic task is much more difficult and complicated than usual.

Since my talk today assumes the notion of Negro or Black identity, I prefer to move in on the problem by discussing the "scene today" as it emerges from a comparative study of eight U.S. cities. I will attempt to outline the therapeutic problem as it appears to me -- an anthropologist/linguist -- who has had as partial background, some four years of work in the context of a clinically oriented psychiatry department.

The pressures for separation into two-plus populations are increasing rapidly. Surrounding this are two major motivations for separatism, one of which is toward "ultimate separation"; the other directed toward the emergence of a new form of "living together" which has not yet been articulated or even devised.

Having had several years experience with clinicians and experimental psychologists, I feel that I am on narrow grounds even talking about a putative entity or group called the "urban Negro." For most of you are trained to think about and treat individual problems: to help a person adjust to his "reality," to rethink his sexual or other social identities, in order for him to mature and lead a more productive life.

Yet we as mostly urban citizens, clinicians, and researchers are faced with a situation in which a successful adjustment to an identity

which an entire group rejects, is at issue. The tenuous notions of treatment and "cure" are rather more clouded than usual in these days when the very search for identity depends on one's fellows, and how they are changing, how they act and are listened to or reacted against.

For in the very notion of the term "Negro" is an implicit gathering of taxonomic traits which may or may not represent actualities. For the ultimate separatists, represented most clearly by a group of behavioral biologists and hangers-on, these traits represent something which is permanent; unchangeable after some age if not by birth. Some of these traits are said to be "natural," "unsuccessful," and somehow entrenched in the genetic, "deep" biological structure of our being. These people concentrate on one or a couple of defining traits which are implicitly made ideal or central -- such as aggression, territoriality, peck order, cognitive richness of environment, etc. They start, again implicitly, from a "norm" of apparent success and study how to "upgrade," or improve "deficient" behavior. Whatever the empirical or theoretical considerations from which they proceed, they nonetheless are moving toward ultimate separatism and, I suspect, social control of a sort in which those whose own group embodies the norm, are the ones who can claim rights of control. A surprisingly large proportion of the ultimate separatists are second and third generation ethnics whose ambivalence about their own forefathers' backgrounds apparently heightens their concern with being on the "winning side."

The other separatists include those who articulate ideas like "Black Power." In essence, they seem to be looking for a modus vivendi which

will eventually end their Negroness as being a central defining characteristic of their being, as far as non-blacks are concerned. The most peculiar fact about that group called Negro is that it has always been an extrinsically defined group - i.e., those people the whites have regarded and treated as black have found themselves discriminated against. Until the past few years, Negroes have not operated politically, economically, or educationally as a group. They have bought the melting pot myth as if it applied to them. Perhaps, then, as a first therapeutic recommendation, adjustment to being Black in Black terms is highly desirable.

While this sounds both simple and simple-minded, it is neither. A colleague of mine who does apparently effective therapy in the context of a penitentiary, worked with Negro men in a relatively straightforward manner. He asked them to express their rage to him -- and he interpreted it positively rather than pathologically -- "so they didn't have to keep coming back to prison," he said. In effect, I suppose he was training a type of militant; to adjust, from his therapeutic point-of-view, was to accept being Black personally and to work at changing the group image.

There is a large literature on group behavior, much of it excellent. From an anthropologist's point-of-view, however, much of it does not apply to the contemporary scene since it is devoid of the history within which group members operate. What is the rationality of operating as an individual who can "make it" in white society when the group is not making it? One can argue strongly that the "successful" Negro in white terms,

is a social deviant in Black terms. The strains on the "front Negro" and Uncle Tom and "fat cat" are increasing as the new generation of young Blacks lost their respect for them - and we can predict that more and more of them will be in need of therapy in the near future.

Alternatively we can attempt to look for socially therapeutic gambits which will affect the total Black population - thereby changing the symptomatology of the entire group. The problems of changing the behavior of an entire group seem somewhat more slippery when we remember that the Blacks have gained much of their group identity from the outside.

We must, I think, begin asking not only about Negroes, but also about the nature of the outside which faces and defines them.

It is often said, these days, that the world is splitting into two camps, black and white. But that hardly "explains" why some people and some groups of whites are counter-marching as groups; why some whites feel terribly guilty about the plight of the blacks, while others are completely enraged.

Although prejudice can be explained in psycho-social, individual terms, in terms of the kinds of large-scale acting-out reactions we are now experiencing, it would behoove us to look for larger patterns first in the strategy of understanding the current picture.

From my personal/professional point-of-view, the social pressures we are experiencing can be best understood in the context of group identification and group behavior. This would include designations not

just of Black and white - because that division doesn't explain very much of the dynamics of the current situation. Instead I propose that we look at the urban scene as a number of groups (call them sub-cultures) which have parallel structures along socio-economic, nationality-color-ethnic lines.

We can posit, simply, that rage, even group rage is associated with some form of frustration. Within this context it follows that some number of individuals are similarly motivated; they share some of the same desires, goals. And they all become furious if they don't get to the goal, or are fearful that they will not be able to.

This description makes a great deal of sense - when it is associated with organizations we believe to be "rational"; where there is a structured plan, and everyone operates according to that plan, ideally as he relates to the organization. What you're being asked to entertain, in the case of "naturally occurring" groups, is that they also act as if they have a "structured Plan."

If this notion is to make any sense, a number of questions immediately present themselves. First, how does any group "get" a plan - with no apparent Board of Directors, group leader, or chain of command? Secondly, how is a plan maintained? Third, how does it get passed on?

For those of us who were brought up in relatively "tight" ethnic communities, the last question has an obvious answer. The so-called plan is passed on in each generation in much the same way as other

"identification" markers of age and sex are; i.e., they are part of the interactional dynamics between parents and children. Most of the everyday behavior of children is tacitly or explicitly presented to children, and similarly the childrens' behavior is approved or disapproved. In most families the constant flow of messages include those concerned with proper speech, proper dress, proper attitudes about people, school, morality, and so on.

For those people who think of themselves as part of a particular community or sub-culture, many of the messages are not merely who to be vis-à-vis oneself, but there are also constant reminders about who are your cousins, who can be good friends, who one can depend on and trust, who will do you in. Perhaps most important is who you will or can marry.

It is quite necessary, in maintaining such groups, to be able to pick out and recognize other group members, as well as different kinds of "outsiders" or non-members. Therefore, much of the training which goes on in households relates to quickly spotting the "right kind of people." Most of us in academe can spot each other by the combination of clothes, pipe, and form of speech. A few seconds' probing will yield field of interest, academic pedigree, and the "league we play in."

Children in ethnic families get very sharp training along similar lines. Whereas most White Americans are aware of social differences, most ethnics recognize, and are constantly concerned with recognizing members of their own groups, and particular out-group members. Ask

most any second or third generation Italian- or Jewish-American here today to pick out others of like backgrounds, and he not only can do it; he has, in fact, already been engaged in doing that job here, today.

The passing-on and maintenance of group behavior seems to be taken very seriously by many. The actual dynamics occur in the form of many explicit, some very "sneaky" tactics. Explicit are the many church and fraternal societies which are clearly restrictive - I recall in my own fraternity days how "incorrect" types would be refused by saying how "unhappy" they would be. At times when assimilation appears imminent to a group, a great deal of wailing, ritual death and excommunication ceremonies become evident. There are enough contemporary events of this sort to convince us that group feelings still run strong in some groups.

About the "structured plan" - it appears that among the "identity" feelings which maintain the group itself, are a number which relate to issues both internal and external. And as long as the group maintains a relatively stable form as a group, its response to various issues can appear, become evident, or change with a fair degree of ease. For example, our Irish-American communities have remained remarkably stable even though the identity with Ireland and traditional Irish things has effectively disappeared for many.

Group structure, then, takes on a sui generis existence for its members in many respects. The properties of the group, what its "plan" is, are usually partially internal and partly external. While those of some ethnic groups may have deep feelings about their relationship

to others of like background, they may also have deep feelings, some positive, some counter-feelings about members of other groups. Thus, many of the ethnic groups' males are deeply attracted to "super-white" females who represent not just sexuality, but also lines that cannot be crossed in potential marriage. Just as many active members of the W.C.T.U. are said to be thoroughly familiar with alcoholics, many ethnic groups are partly predicated on who they are not. Part of their identity is counter-identity -- against someone, or in other peoples' terms.

This description fits most sub-cultural groups, but it lends especial understanding to Negroes as a group. Since most Negroes have not had very deep group feelings as being members of the Black group, much of their identity seems to be counter-identity. There is a great deal of in-commonness among Blacks, but an essential part of their being up to the past few years, has been expressed and felt more as who they are not rather than as who they are. Much of their orientation toward integration has been in terms of not being White - and to "be," to have identity, would be to be white.

I suppose much of the present militancy boils down simply to the fact that being Black is not merely being non-white. Identity as Whites is, quite realistically, not an open path. Black as non-white has had a generally pernicious history. It has tended to splinter the group or the possibility of in-group feelings since the counter-White myth seemed to allow for individuals making it in White society as Whites - but not for the whole group.

Most Blacks now claim, quite realistically, that this cannot be; that the true road to identity is not through individual identity as semi-whites, but through group identity as Blacks.

I think you can appreciate the therapeutic task - in a world in which an entire group is moving to discover, work out, and explicate an identity which is fulfilling to most of its membership - and in a fairly hostile external world which has enjoyed the inherent falsity of the integration myth.

For the clinician, the current situation poses some peculiar therapeutic problems. It is very difficult not to communicate to a Negro patient one's personal feelings about the integrationist Negro position versus the Black identity position. And whatever stand one takes on this issue may relate quite directly to the patient's pathology and treatment.

The relationship between the therapist's position and the patient's identity problem may very well be contradictory. Such a conflict may effectively block therapeutic progress, unless this difficulty is somehow verbalized; and the therapist remains a fairly constant social observer and can move as the "scene" moves - meaning continuous reading and understanding of authors such as Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Frantz Fanon. The therapists' business is not, in this process, to be a moral judge of the Black movement (one way or the other), but to be able to empathize with his Negro patients. The possibility of interpreting the patient's world picture as part of his pathology is a constant

page 10.

danger. My personal feeling is that the most effective long-term treatment will be directed toward a changing Black group identity, helping the patient achieve a flexible adjustment to a world in which he can move toward discovering himself and in a way that will allow us to change as well.