

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 046 495

PS 003 986

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TITLE Negro Culture and Early Childhood Education.  
PUB DATE Jun 70  
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Montessori Centennial Conference, New York, New York, June, 1970

FDRS PRICE FDRS Price MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29  
DESCRIPTORS Compensatory Education, Cross Cultural Training, \*Cultural Differences, Culture Conflict, \*Early Childhood Education, \*Intervention, Language Development, Linguistic Competence, \*Negro Culture, \*Negro Dialects, Negro Youth, Nonstandard Dialects

ABSTRACT

Most compensatory early childhood programs are based on an assumption of linguistic and cognitive deficits which must be remedied if the Negro child is to succeed in school, but much collected data questions this assumption. The language of many lower class Negro children has been shown to be well-ordered and highly structured, although the dialect differs from standard English. A body of literature has appeared which terms the Negro mother inadequate, but newer insight, illustrated by the work of Virginia Heyer Young, recognizes that the Negro has a culture and life style which is meaningful and well-defined. Culture and race are too often used interchangeably, and early intervention programs have been created which are ethnocentric and lack cross-cultural perspective. Suggestions are given for ways in which the school needs to be restructured to take advantage of these observed cultural differences, particularly in regard to language and reading. Intervention is seen as necessary, but it should assume a culture conflict, rather than a culture deficit, viewpoint. (NH)

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NEGRO CULTURE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Stephen S. Baratz

The era of the 1960's is now beyond us. As we look back we might discern two interesting and parallel trends. One the advancement of the technological revolution best exemplified by the goal advanced by President Kennedy to reach the moon within a decade and the other, the declaration of a War on Poverty by President Johnson which was aimed at bringing the nation's poor into the mainstream of society by 1976. The one, reaching the moon, has been dramatically reached; the other, bringing the poor into the mainstream of society by 1976 seems to have barely gotten off the drawing boards and the goal seems to be frustrated at every point. The reasons for the different pace and relative ease of execution and achievement of these two goals is not the subject matter of this paper. Rather, in making this distinction, I only wish to point out what is the basic topic of this paper--the current conceptual confusion over just what kind of variables are available for manipulation by the policy maker in the area of poverty and the lack of clarity and agreement among social scientists as to their relative effectiveness and importance.

Since Mrs. Doyle, the Chairman of this centennial meeting, asked me to present an overview of a particular position about early childhood education and since I wish to present some policy-related considerations on the matter discussed above, I shall describe our current stance toward Early Childhood Education and weave it into a discussion of the problems of the social scientist as interventionist.

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Conference, New York, New York, June, 1970.

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In a paper recently published by my wife and myself we outlined a perspective on early childhood education with heavy weight placed upon the cultural milieu of the Negro in the United States. Our basic point in that paper was that early childhood education has failed primarily because we have not given adequate recognition to the unique elements of Negro culture in our models of intervention in the early childhood years. We indicated that most studies of Negro behavior were done working with an egalitarian melting-pot model which assumed the non-existence of a Negro culture. We argued that this normative approach was a reaction to the genetic racists, who when talking about differences, always related these differences to a theory of genetic inferiority. The current work in the area of Negro behavior has taken on what we have called an anti-racist, racist stance. That is in throwing out the concept of legitimate behavioral differences because they had been linked to genetic structure, we have substituted an equally distorted view of the Negro as a sick white man.

This process can easily be observed in the accepted conception of language ability of Negroes as developed by psychologists and educationists. In fact, we point out that the current conception of Negro language advanced by contemporary social scientists since it is as ethnocentric as that of the early racists agrees in many ways with the conceptualization of Negro language offered to us by those same early genetic racists. They wish to disassociate themselves from.

To give you an example of what I mean, I will give you two quotes from the writings of two different theorists at two different points in

time, both discussing the language ability of low income Negroes. First that offered by Gonzales (1922) describing the language of the Carolina Coastal Negroes commonly called Gullah.

"Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of wealthier colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia. With characteristic laziness, these Gullah Negroes took short cuts to the ears of their auditors, using as few words as possible, sometimes making one gender serve for three, one tense for several, and totally disregarding singular and plural numbers."

Next I want you to listen to an excerpt taken from a piece done by Martin Deutsch (1963) addressing himself to somewhat the same issue.

"In observations of lower-class homes, it appears that speech sequences seem to be temporally very limited and poorly structured syntactically. It is thus not surprising to find that a major focus of deficit in the children's language development is syntactical organization and subject continuity."

These two examples are not extraordinary. In fact it is difficult to find a quote from the current intervention literature which differs in a substantial way from the Deutsch quote just given. You might wish to try an experiment by yourself and look through any current book on Negro education to see if you find a different conceptualization of his language. The first place I might suggest you look is in the handbook for Head Start teachers.

We have indicated that statements of the former type coming from the genetic racist orientation, differs little from those of the latter type which come from what we have called the social pathology position. We call the latter position "the social pathology model" primarily because

it is rooted in an environmental conception of causality which, in contrast to genetic model, asserts that the Negroes defective language comes from the pathological social environment in which the child finds himself. Thus while both positions described above agree that there is an apparent linguistic deficit, and hence pathology, they disagree as to its causal nexus, and by implication its possibilities for change brought about by some form of intervention. The genetic position, and its latter day adherents such as Jensen, finally come down to intervention programs of systematic eugenics, while the social pathologists concentrate on various forms of environmental manipulation to inoculate the child, that is protect him from his pathological environment. The nature of this process of inoculation, specifically what aspects of the environment one wishes to manipulate and whether it is at all possible to isolate the significant variables to determine whether or not one's intervention is truly having an impact are questions which I will address shortly. Nevertheless, one major trend in the literature is to concentrate on the mother as the deficit producint situation. The deficit-pathology model and its maternal emphasis relates to our current intervention strategies through the following set of interlocking assumptions:

- "1. that, upon entering school, the Negro disadvantaged child is unable to learn in the standard educational environment;
2. that the ghetto environment does not provide adequate sensory stimulation for cognitive growth;
3. that this inability to learn is due to inadequate mothering and her inability to provide adequate linguistic and cognitive stimulation in the first few years of life.

The first premise is buttressed by the continued reports of failure of black children in our schools. Indeed, they do not benefit from the standard educational environment. (That does not, however, say anything about whether they are capable of learning generally.) The second premise is an extension of the earlier work on mothering of institutionalized children as reported by Spitz (1945), Goldfarb (1955), Reingold (1956), and Skeels and Dye (1939). Much of this literature, however, is predicated on the total absence of a mother or mothering agent. Indeed, the Skeels follow-up study (1960) indicates that a moronic mother is better than no mother at all. The difficulty in extending this logic to the ghetto child is that he has a mother, and his behavior derives precisely from her presence rather than her absence.

Then too, the sensory stimulation assumption was an over-extension of the earlier work of Kretch et al. (1962), where animals were raised in cages with either considerable sensory stimulation or none at all. Again, the model was that of absence of stimulation rather than difference in type and presentation of stimulation."

It is important at this point to reiterate that the intervention model, upon which Head Start and most other early childhood programs are based, rests upon an assumption of linguistic and cognitive deficits which must be remedied if the child is to succeed in school. Thus one may assume that if data is available which indicates that there is a logical and coherent linguistic system evident among Negroes in the U.S. then the major, if not the sole, rationale for the early childhood intervention as presently conceived is called into question.

Such questioning has indeed been mounting in intensity in the last few years. Starting with Herskovits in 1941 and renewed by contemporary linguists, anthropologists and folkloreists and the development of a systematic interest in Negro culture as a viable object of study in its own right, sufficient data on Negro language has been developed to call into question many of the assumptions upon which intervention programs are based.

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The linguistic argument of the moment seems most clear-cut and illustrative of the exciting confrontation of ideas going on in child development circles. The linguistic data do not support the assumption of a linguistic deficit. The linguistic competence of Negro children has been well-documented in a number of recent investigations. Many lower class Negro children speak a well-ordered, highly structured, but different dialect from that of the standard English. Negro children have developed a language. This language system while using the same lexical items as standard English has a different grammatical system. Thus when one attempts to measure the linguistic competence of a Negro child using testing devices used to measure competence in standard English, the Negro child is bound to appear to fail. However, when we look at the child's performance on these tests we see that what looks originally to be errors are really nothing but the result of a systematic and different linguistic system. The errors themselves are lawful and suggest to the linguist not pathology but a system. A system which is the result of a historical encounter between African and American cultures--an encounter which can and has been described and documented to an amazing degree of accuracy and consistency. Our conclusion thus is that the major thesis of the social pathology model thus rests on an ethnocentric conception of language which simply falls apart when one takes Negro culture as a unique entity and treats the differences observed from a cross-cultural perspective. Thus one of the basic rationales for intervention, the development language and cognitive skills in "defective" children, just cannot be supported by the current linguistic data.

We have elsewhere gone to some length to describe the nature and structure of this language system to demonstrate that so long as social policy relevant to intervention is based upon a language deficit, rather than a language difference, earlier and earlier attempts at intervention are bound to fail. Nevertheless, despite linguistic and cultural evidence to the contrary, a body of literature has appeared which concentrates on the Negro mother as an inadequate agent of socialization and language development. Indeed some intervention proposals advanced wish to reach the child at the earliest possible moment in order to assure that what appears to be a language deficit does not develop. Thus we see appearing intervention schemas which advocate the introduction of specialists into the home who would not only provide the assumed missing verbal and cognitive stimulation to the child, but also teach the mother how to raise her children properly.

Other steps such as taking the child out of his environment for short periods or finally putting children into kibbutz like controlled environments all are current topics of discussion in child development circles.

It is important to repeat that the inadequate mother hypothesis rests essentially on the grounds that the mother's behavior produces deficit children and that it was created to account for a deficit that in actuality does not exist--that is that ghetto mothers produce linguistically and cognitively impaired children who cannot learn. While I have this point concentrated on language--new data is available which illustrates the ethnocentrism of current studies of Negro family life.

In her recent article on family and childhood in a southern Negro community, Virginia Heyer Young, reports an anthropological study of child-rearing practices and family organization which provides a very different perception of the processes often glimpsed by social scientists but never adequately seen from a cross-cultural perspective. In her paper, which is a classic of its kind, Young attempts to differentiate the cultural model from what we have called the social pathology model. How this focus is different from that taken by the other social sciences is clearly stated in the following quotation which is meant to be a theoretical critique of previous studies of the Negro family, particularly the classic works of Kardiner and Ovesey and Davis and Dollard.

"Interpersonal relations within the Negro family (she says) were considered the product of psychological maladjustment resulting from White society's definition of the Negro as a lesser human being and its systematic deprivation of his wants. Racial discrimination was thought to determine fundamentally the character of relationships between Negro parents and children and husbands and wives. The Negro was assumed to have no life style of his own and to make no adjustments to society except the destructive ones based on his agreement with Whites' judgments of him. Certainly some individuals' life experience would match the construct. But where a historically and culturally distinct social group is studied, cultural differences should be assumed and the direct applicability of personality theory derived from another culture should not. It was in this context of knowledge that the present observational study of childhood was undertaken; it will be seen that the generalizations about Negro parent-child relationships that derive from clinical studies were not found in this field situation and that other types of experience not derivable from psychoanalytic theory were found to exist and to be significant."

Her data indicate that there are meaningful and well-defined styles of child-rearing evident within the community studied and her observational

work counters much that has been written about Negro child-raising patterns. Indeed it is precisely this kind of participant observation study of the Negro family that we called for when we indicated that there is almost no anthropologically oriented field work which offers a description of what actually does happen in the Negro home. Most of our available data comes from laboratory studies and surveys. Young's work fills this gap to a degree that we had not anticipated when we previously criticized existing studies of mothering and child-rearing as they were supposed to be descriptive of Negro life. Further the style of research observation represented by Young's work can clearly be contrasted as we did with the language example above with the style of research observation done by the psychologist when he attempts participant observations, but without an adequate appreciation of the impact of culture on that which he observes.

Many writers have pointed to the work, still incomplete, of Schoggen and Schoggen as a possible source of data relevant to child-rearing practices of Negro and white lower and middle class families. The Schoggens have attempted to record all instances of social interaction between adults and older children with a target child. They have attempted to standardize their observations across groups by emphasizing the interactions which occur in "functionally equivalent situations" such as meal-times, bed-times, etc. Young on the other hand indicates that such events in the Negro family are casual at best and do not serve the same functional purpose as they do in white families. The major difference between the Schoggen study and that of Young is that the concentration on functionally equivalent situations by Schoggen implies

a pre-determined concept of what happens to be important to within a particular culture and that these events must be set and routine. Thus, as Young demonstrates, it is quite evident that eating and sleeping routines are quite different in lower class Negro families as are interaction styles between adults and children. Thus while we as psychologist scientists might define a particular situation as functionally equivalent it may be that a particular person or culture may not define that same situation in the same way.

The anthropologist and his recognition of the legitimacy of culturally rooted differences would never be trapped into looking for such things as functionally equivalent units. Rather than assume what turns out to be normative approach based within a particular standard culture, the anthropologist wishes to see the system he studies on its own terms.

The cultural difference model seeks to legitimize the discussion of cultural differences without bringing up the spectre of race differences and their potential for attributing genetic concomitants to these differences. Indeed the terms culture and race too often tend to be used interchangeably without a sensitivity to the historical and conceptual morass these concepts bring along with them. The problem of Negroes in the United States, as we see it, may best be understood within the cultural and not the racial frame. The cultural differences described in language behavior and child-rearing practices, need no other referent than a historical and relativistic understanding of how different cultures manage their worlds and how, at times, minor differences

in these world management techniques may play large roles in not only the problems members of these groups have in making it into the mainstream of society but also in understanding how the behaviors of members of these groups tend to be mis-interpreted by out-group members (citizens and scientists alike). The differences in perception for instance, between how the home is used and the function of meal-time when viewed from a cross-cultural perspective may indeed be understood when one understands what every anthropologist attempts to understand in his observations--that is we all tend to live in a cultural matrix which often gears our observations towards the familiar and comfortable and this frame may well lead us away from seeing order and regularity in people and groups coming from frames which differ from our own. Without this cross-cultural perspective many social scientists have seen Negro-American behavior as a distorted form of white behavior. This we have pointed to when we discussed the ethnocentrism of American social science. It is how most of our early intervention programs have been ethnocentric and consequently failed.

When ethnocentric social science data gets fed into social policy we get a form of institutional racism. We have called for a rather close re-examination of most of our research on the Negro in terms of seeing how this research might compare with field-based cross-cultural studies of the Negro in America.

It is also such a view which gives us some insight into the future direction of research and intervention in this field. I do not think that a greater sophistication about Negro language behavior for instance,

will allow us to continue to discuss the problems of Negro children from the vantage points of theories stressing verbal deprivation, verbal deficit or inadequate stimulation. So too, I think, it will become increasingly difficult to talk about inadequate mothering as a "cause" of the problems of the Negro poor.

Again, going back to the language example, knowing that there is a language system already in place and knowing that there are situational variables needed to trip off this language system, it is incumbent upon us in the intervention field to begin looking at the ways the school needs to be restructured to take advantage of these observed cultural differences.

A number of us have already suggested that one obvious way of restructuring present educational practice is to begin utilization of the Negro child's dialect system very early in the process of education. Further, recognizing that for the most part it is easier to teach a child to read in his own language system than in one foreign to him, we have suggested that the traditional modes of teaching of reading to the Negro may have to be changed.

The speaker of standard English when taught to read needs only to learn to decode the symbols on the page in front of him and fit what he has decoded into his own developed grammatical system. On the other hand, the speaker of Negro dialect has two, often incompatible, chores before him in the same situation. He must not only learn to decode the written symbol but must also translate and reorder the words he has learned into his own grammatical system. This task is further complicated

by the fact that the words used in both systems are often similar yet their overt similarity hold many traps for the young child--not the least of which is the confusion on behalf of both child and teacher as to the language spoken and the language to be taught. Since teachers of minority children continually complain about the bad language of their children, it becomes imperative that the dialect system be taught to the teacher. In addition she should be able to recognize the difference between a linguistically based reading problem stemming from dialect as opposed to a problem relating to already well-documented difficulties in teaching children how to read such as dislexia.

It might well be important for me to point out that when we advance the previous proposition a number of questions often are raised which I will attempt to briefly deal with here.

Perhaps the most often cited objection to the thinking outlined above revolves around why is it that the children of German or Spanish or Oriental parents do not have the same difficulties in school that Negro children speaking a different dialect of English have. To answer this question one must understand two points: 1) that children from such national cultures as itemized above unquestionably speak a different language and, in most cases, this language is seen as legitimate. When the child speaks Spanish in the classroom, the teacher, who may not like it, still does not deny its legitimacy and its national base. Such is not the case with the language of the Negro child, for his language utilizes English words on a different grammatical system. It is the system underlying the lexical items and not the lexical items themselves

that makes the difference in the case of the Negro. The confusion produced by the great similarity in lexical items leads to an assumption that the child speaks a form of bad English. It is precisely because of the apparent similarity between standard and non-standard English that for all these years no one bothered to look at Negro non-standard on its own terms. My second point is that when other language systems develop in somewhat the same way as Negro-non-standard developed, the child will have the same problems as the Negro child. Such an example as "Tex-Mex" dialect commonly used around south Texas, which while being a dialect of standard Spanish, is structurally different from it. An interesting side light of this particular example is that the attempt of current second language approaches to use standard Spanish in schools with large proportions of "Tex-Mex" speakers seems to have the same potential for failure as that described for the Negro. It will fail because the standard Spanish utilized in the textbooks is not the language the "Tex-Mex" child has learned. The "Tex-Mex" speaker of Spanish has the same difficulty with standard Spanish as the Negro has with standard English. The same, I might add, is true for children of Appalachian white children. Thus, in answer to another criticism often advanced, it would be necessary for children of common dialect groupings to spend some time during an academic day in language instruction. This issue, I might point out, is often raised by those who feel that what we are advocating is some form of segregated education. To this we respond that since we indeed have such a situation in most of our urban centers anyway, little is lost in such an attempt. Further even children in

integrated situations, unless totally swamped linguistically, still do not perform on most standardized measures of reading as do the whites which suggest the persistence of dialect interference. Further if indeed this language system interferes with the acquisition of standard English, then denying its existence in the school system and not dealing with it through the use of specialized methodologies one may well solve ones own ideological conscience, but this will do little to educate children.

Finally, the question has been raised as to whether this dialect readily enables a child to communicate and understand high level conceptual relationships. Again to answer this question one must take recourse to linguistics and cross-cultural studies of language and cognition. From this body of literature one may readily assume that where there is a language system and, by implication, something to communicate to a speaker of the same languages--communication will occur. Whether a particular language system can communicate specific items based in another language area is a question to be answered by contrastive studies. Yet one must understand the relativistic nature of this comparison. Let us take, for instance, off quoted examples of the eskimo's terms for snow, which by sheer number are of greater complexity and sophistication than that contained in English. One may make somewhat the same analogy for the Negro's description of skin color where the gradations go from "he bright" to "he ashy" to "he dark" with intermediate terms on up the line--quite a difference one might argue from a mere description of brown or black--the only available ways white's have of describing the color of a Negroes skin.

Finally, we get back to the question of intervention policy raised earlier. I hope that in this digest of our view of early childhood education on Negro culture you will not get the idea that we think intervention is not necessary. Further, we are not arguing that the Negro ought to be left in his place because his culture is so unique and beautiful and ought not to be disturbed. Rather, as I have inferred many times today, the points of intervention chosen as the base for our present intervention policies have led us into blind alleys and to failures. New, perhaps revolutionary, schemas of intervention ought to be developed which are based upon cross-cultural studies of what goes on in the home and in the milieu of the Negro child. Central to this alternative direction is a recognition of cultural uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Negro in the U.S. As Young indicates and I repeat her comment quoted above, "where a historically and culturally distinct social group is studied, cultural differences should be assumed and the direct applicability of personality theory derived from another culture should not." This recognition of culture differences must be extended into our intervention policy.

Like it or not the patterns of development within Negro culture described in detail by many writers do not lend themselves to easy acculturation into mainstream white society. Rather than seeing this acculturative process as the development of incompetence, and intervention as the prevention of incompetence, we propose that a model stressing culture conflict might best be utilized as an alternative perspective to the model of deficit-producing incompetence. The deficit model

assumes a lack of something which must be filled--the culture conflict position assumes an adequately acculturated individual who must learn the points at which his own system interferes with the acquisition of behaviors which are needed to cross into a second culture. The paradigm stresses a two-fold learning process.

The first part consists of a long term research program directed at understanding in greater detail the points at which Negro and mainstream culture appear functionally different from one another and not simply incompatible with each other. Secondly, interventions must be based upon a recognition of these functionally different patterns and how they may be overcome through contrastive teaching. Thus rather than seeing Negro culture as an impediment to acculturation it may very well be that with a thorough understanding of the culture on its own terms may aid us in reaching the goals we promised in the sixties but cannot yet fulfill.