Jessica Friedman and Kimberly Huang: Language Use of Caretakers and its Effect on the Mentally Handicapped

Proposal

In Western society, the mentally disabled might as well be called the "socially disabled." The mentally disabled are treated as social outcasts that have no use to the functionality of society. We would like to see how this unfortunate and intolerant opinion is conveyed linguistically in homes that care for people with developmental disabilities. The way people are treated throughout their lives has an impact on their overall health. Anna Corwin expresses this in her study of nuns living in a convent. The way the people caring for the nuns in their old age has a significant impact in their mental capabilities later in life (Corwin 2014). Our goals for this film are to (1) view how mentally disabled people are treated by their care-takers (2) observe how language towards mentally disabled people is used by their care-takers (3) display the impacts that the language used by the care-takers has on the mentally disabled people they care for. Some methods I will be using to conduct research are (1) participant observation. We will sit with the caretakers while they interact with the mentally handicapped. (2) Conduct interviews with the caretakers. (3) Record daily conversations between the mentally handicapped and their caretakers. (4) Possibly create questionnaires for the caretakers to respond to. The idea of autobiographical explorations is mentioned in Asch & Asch’s “Ethnographic Film.” It is possibly that we may have the caretakers record themselves. We would do this because autobiographical explorations offer a different perspective (Asch & Asch 1996: 414). This would be helpful in seeing the reasons why caretakers talk to the mentally disabled as they do and their justifications for doing so.

Final Report:

In the past couple of weeks, we managed to get into contact with The Arc of Livingston-Wyoming and secured two samples of caretakers from different locations in Geneseo. We will be observing the caretakers’ verbal interactions with their mentally handicapped patients and interviewing them one-on-one afterwards. We want to see if by changing their speech patterns towards their mentally handicapped patients that they are actually encouraging and/or discouraging certain behaviors. Hans Balkom proved in his study that caretakers who verbally infantilized the autistic children they provided for remained stagnant in their language acquisition and developed Developmental Language Delay, DLD (Balkom 2010: 312). In a similar vein, Shony P.J. Mathew states that mentally handicapped individuals, depending on how profound their handicap is, are able to reach social maturity and that “their eventual level of social development has implication for the degree of support needed in their literacy arrangement and their integration in the community with increasing emphasis on mainstreaming the attainment of skills in personal, domestic and community functioning.” (Mathew 2012: 184) In other words, these individuals, if given the chance to be "trained" (taught), may be capable of learning skills that will assimilate them into society. By taking the results of these both studies, we can infer that how caretakers speak to their patients can either inhibit new skill sets to form and fully function in society or prohibit their development, having them remain as they are.

Possible Interview Questions:

1.) What are your views on mentally handicapped individuals?
2.) How do you think you treat your residents?
3.) From your experience, do your residents retain information taught to them in the long-term? Short-term?
4.) What kind of activities do you engage in with your residents on a daily basis? Is it varied? Repetitive?
5.) Do you treat all your residents the same? How? Why or why not?
6.) Would you say working with mentally handicapped people is different than people without disabilities? How?
7.) Do you speak to all of your residents the same?
8.) Do all of your residents require the same amount of care?

Conclusion

In this sample of caregiver-resident and caregiver-caregiver interaction, we observed that the caregivers engage in activities that may both inhibit and prohibit their residents’ social maturity.

Inhibit:

- Encouraging residents’ ability to learn new games especially memorization games.
- Designating tasks to teach responsibility and accountability.
- Teaching residents the concept of money.

Prohibit:

- Posing a lot of questions.
- Speaking in simpler terms.
- Exaggerated reactions.
- Speaking on their behalf.
- Speaking to other caregivers as if the resident isn't there.
- Caregivers playing a parental role - correcting inappropriate social behavior and giving advice.
- Speaking in a high pitched voice; baby talk.
In linguistic anthropology, there is a debate on how literacy is developed. There are two major approaches that anthropologists rally behind - the ideological approach and the autonomous approach. The autonomous approach stresses that the advent of literacy is not dependent on social context. Literacy is an innate skill that is universally developed that result in the same cognitive effects cross-culturally. However, the ideological approach is explained by Niko Besnier as, "Rather than seeking an overarching and context-free characterization of the cognitive and social consequences of literacy, proponents of the ideological model focus on the activities, events, and ideological contracts associated with particular manifestations of literacy (Besnier 1995:5)." Literacy development is dependent on social practices. When studying literacy, it is crucial to consider social context and activities of language learners. In a study conducted by Shirley Brice Heath, preschool children presented with different literacy practices performed differently in school. Children with wide access to books and other literacy stimuli were also presented with questions concerning the literature they were being read. The book's concepts were also talked about with the children during social contexts other than reading. In turn, these children had heightened literacy skills, learned to be good listeners, and were prepared for their academic careers (Heath 2001:321). Heath studied a second group of children. These children were presented with literary based stimuli. Their rooms were decorated with the alphabet and nursery rhymes and books were used to learn words for various objects. However, once the children developed oral skills, reading and books' content discussion were halted. These children were prepared for academics in some aspects but lacked analysis skills which ultimately lead the children to be less prepared as years of schools progressed unlike the first group of children (Heath 2001:330). Lastly, Heath studied a third group of children. In this group, children were not read to, but were taught verbal and nonverbal interactions. These children developed rhyming, storytelling skills, and a profound verbal repertoire. However, they were unprepared for academic questions and therefore fell behind in school (Heath 2001:336). Ultimately, literacy manifestations are able to influence other cognitive tasks.

Moreover, it is believed by many scholars that people learn language in the same way that they learn other advanced cognitive tasks. In a study done by Scribner and Cole, it is revealed that literacy learned through different social practices led to different cognitive effects (Scribner and Cole 1981:234). Researchers have proven that language does, in fact, influence thought processes. Building off of research of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf, John Lucy discusses "Whorfian effects," or ways in which language, thought, and culture all influence each other. Lucy determines that different uses of language in social contexts may result in different cognitive effects such as thought process and patterns (Lucy 1996: 52).

In our case with the caregivers and their mentally handicapped residents, we have concluded that the way caretakers speak may have a cognitive effect on their residents. However, we have been presented with mixed results in that the caretakers believe that some residents can and want to learn new things, and can be spoken to in a more advanced manner (like an adult), but some remain in a child-like state. The residents in a constant child-like state are spoken to as if they actually were children. Hans Balkom and Shony P.J. Mathew’s research further prove our hypothesis. In Balkom’s study, he concluded that caregivers who verbally infantilized the autistic children they cared for ultimately led to Developmental Language Delay, DLD (Balkom 2010: 312). Similarly, Mathew proved that mentally handicapped peoples are able to reach social maturity depending on how severe their handicap was (Mathew 2012: 184). Combining the findings of both studies, it can be concluded that mentally handicapped individuals’ cognitive ability can be influenced by their surroundings, in this case, specifically their caregivers. Since the advent of literacy and other cognitive abilities is affected by social context, the residents current cognitive state –unprogressive to their cognitive development (treated as a child) or progressive with more advanced cognitive abilities (treated like an adult) – can be a reflection of the caregivers’ treatment of them.

It is inconclusive, however, to say that these interactions definitely stunt or encourage social maturity and their ability to learn new skills. The aforementioned interactions – baby talk, simplifying their words, etc. – may fall under the category of prohibit or inhibit but it is difficult to measure their developmental impact. Further research needs to be done with a larger, more varied sample and more variables to come to a definite conclusion.

This has been improved since the first version.

Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed References Cited

Asch, T. and P. Asch


Balkom Hans et al.


Besnier, N.

1995 Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll. Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundation of Language pp. 5-6

Health, Shirley Brice


Lucy, J.A.

Mathew, Shony P.J.
2012 Social Maturity of Trained and Untrained Mentally Challenged Individuals. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* 3(2): 184-186

Scribner, S. and Cole, M.

Whitehead, Tony L.