

The Alienated Speak

MARY B. LANE

Professor of Education

San Francisco State College

San Francisco, California

IN A SOCIETY so affluent that pawnbrokers have begun stocking lines of new merchandise, "alienation is a many-depreciated thing." Many think that the last half of the twentieth century will be characterized as the "age of alienation." This point of view has enough credence to lend weight to the thesis that alienation is not limited to the poor, the benighted, the unfortunates, or even to the youth.

The quality of alienation, however, that is experienced by so many poor (and let us remember that members of minority groups compose the largest number of poor) has unique feeling tones that may differ somewhat from alienation in general. These feelings and their behavioral counterparts are

what I wish to document in this brief article. Let us not assume, however, that all poor are alienated. Alienation knows no class or color lines.

The background for my documentation comes from eighteen months' experience with a project entitled "Nurseries in Cross-cultural Education."¹ This project's goal is to ascertain if and how cross-cultural nursery schools can be effective instruments for improving mental health in a rapidly changing urban community.

The processes that are being used

¹ *The Nursery School in Preventive Mental Health*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health. Mental Health Project No. 01976-01A1, September 1, 1965-August 31, 1970.

and the data that are being accumulated are concerned with total family life. Thus the nursery schools have attempted to become centers wherein families that are Negro, Caucasian, Oriental, middle-class, poverty, intact, and fatherless may come together and begin to see each other as individuals who have common needs and desires as well as unique potentialities. The fact that each family has a two-year-old attending one of the nursery schools is the main channel of communication among the families and between families and the interracial staff.

From this communication has come a heightened awareness on the staff's part of the dimensions of alienation that plague some of our families. Alienation for the poor may be described by four words: hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness and isolation. Let me describe these feelings in the words of poverty mothers.

Hopelessness

The alienated poor do not think or feel that "tomorrow will be better." When asked, "Do you think you'll be living here (here being a rat-infested third-floor dump) three years?", the answer is invariably given with an incredulous gesture and, "Well, I don't know where else I could go." In discussing living plans many people express the idea of being stuck in the dwelling they occupy.

So many of the poor have been "done to" all of their lives. Seldom have their opinions been solicited. They come to see themselves as society has treated them, i.e., as individuals who are not competent to manage their own affairs. As one mother put it, "When you're

poor and on welfare they think you're nothin' but dirt and nothin' you say makes sense."

People who have developed such depreciated self-concepts can have little hope and can accept little responsibility for planning for the future. This attitude is often interpreted as being disinterested, being lazy, being unfriendly. It is more accurate to understand that a person without hope does not plan for the future. Even visiting is rare. Again and again we were told by the mothers in our project that they seldom visited with neighbors or had a cup of coffee with anyone. Hopelessness breeds suspicion. It binds the person within himself so that ordinary gestures of reaching out are not customarily made.

For many of the poor the church has lost its power to act as a beacon of hope. Repeatedly we were told by mothers that their families no longer attend church although nearly all of them were reared in church-going families. The reasons for drifting away are scanty and lead one to question whether there is not some unconscious behavior functioning. The feeling one gets is that it is just too much trouble to get up and get ready to go to church. "Why bother?" is expressed non-verbally.

Another characteristic bit of behavior is the tendency to use all kinds of excuses to stay in bed, sleep late (meaning from 10 to noon). A rainy day is a good reason not to get up and get children to school. A runny nose may not receive any medical attention but it serves as an acceptable reason to keep the child home.

Too frequently we allow the family that is hopeless to become a hopeless family.

Helplessness

"Well, I find it hard to get out of my housecoat all day and get my youngun dressed and ready to go to school," speaks an AFDC mother. Without hope it is easy to become helpless.

Listen to the day of this mother who is twenty and has two children, the oldest being twenty-three months. In response to a typical day she says, "Well, I dread each day. When Cecil wakes up I feel sleepy and don't want to get up and I know he will be pestering me all day. I have to watch the kids kinda closely and Cecil's always getting his hands in my cooking and he gets on a chair and turns on the gas and he hollers for a bottle. He takes a nap about four and sleeps until six. And he wakes up at six and he is not going to go to bed again until around twelve. And all that time he's bothering me. I can't even take a bath without him taking the rag and washing my back or something."

At no point did this mother consider that there was anything she could do to help herself by organizing her life or by teaching Cecil some of the limits that are necessary for a two-year-old. She simply let each day happen to her and, as she said, "Each day is the same thing over again."

This mother has had great difficulty getting her child to nursery school. Each week a different excuse is offered and to date it is doubtful if the project will be successful in its encouragement. Yet the intent is there. The mother intends to send Cecil but she finds the routines of getting him to school are too much for her to cope with.

Another mother enrolled her daughter but did not get her to school. When this mother was called, she said she did not know where the school was located. The school is in a YMCA that is only two short blocks from the mother's home. When a teacher dropped by and picked her up and took her and her child to school she was delighted and surprised that all of this existed almost in her backyard.

A third mother was called when her child did not "show" even after elaborate enrollment procedures. The mother said it took her until noon to get her two children (both under two) dressed and fed. Again a sense of helplessness in facing the demands of each day incapacitated this mother.

Helplessness coupled with the other qualities of alienation results in a lack of commitment even in those areas which hold considerable promise to make life less difficult. The present difficulties are so overpowering that all energy is expended in just existing day by day. The commitment is not strong enough to exact a price from the alienated. It can always wait until tomorrow. "I shall send him next week," but next week brings new complications and the attendance is postponed until the following week.

Since routines and meeting time demands seem to be two areas with which the alienated have difficulty, perhaps established institutions should take a second look at how our present practices exclude the very ones who need their services most urgently. We often expel children for a day for excessive tardiness, for example. Wouldn't it be more helpful to the alienated to accept children whenever they arrive and

then try to help them experience a sense of loss because of what they have missed?

Would it be possible to reexamine some of the typical school routines to see how they excluded the alienated? Many schools have extensive routines that assume an intact family. The alienated poor families are most likely to lack a male figure that can be considered "father." Is it asking too much that teachers be at least *as aware* of the mores and taboos of the poor as they are those of middle-income families?

Worthlessness

As mentioned earlier the poor are often members of a minority group—a large proportion of them are Negro. The self-hate of the Negro that is evident even by age three has been well documented by Kenneth Clark and others. To be a Negro in our culture and to be poor has the potential of creating an alienation that depreciates the self until life becomes meaningless. Then, too, the middle-class Negro finds himself alienated from the lower-class Negro. He lacks identity with the middle-class culture and he has lost his identity with his own group.

Often the poverty group speak of the "outside world," as if it is something in which they do not have membership.

In situations in which there are cross-cultural populations the poor are more inclined to stay in the background and let someone else "run the show." This, too, lends itself to thinking, "I'm no damn good." In the project community, for example, middle-income newcomers hold nearly all of the of-

fices in the neighborhood school PTA; they run the Tiny Tots program; they have important positions in the other social structures. As a consequence, the poor old-timers of the community are resentful and yet are not motivated to change the picture, primarily because of a deep sense of inferiority. One mother questioned the wisdom of a discussion group saying, "We can't discuss anything. We don't know enough."

The sense of worthlessness is accompanied by fear of taking a risk. It is easier to live on welfare and not have to face up to failing at a job than to have tried some kind of work and failed to succeed. Certainly, the Negro has abundant data to bolster his feeling of inadequacy from the treatment he has received in our country. And so that great American value—work—has little appeal to the alienated poor. Work leads to trouble and trouble is plentiful without reaching out for it.

Often the alienated poor perpetuate their own feelings of worthlessness by the way they treat their children. The belt is a frequent tool of disciplining very young children. And the language that accompanies the blows leaves no doubt in the child's mind of his worthlessness, "You no-count bum. You worthless little devil!"

Since life holds so many frustrations, aggressive adult behavior is frequent and the belt is kept in a handy place, such as on top of the refrigerator so that it is literally ever-ready to brand worthlessness into the young's psyche. One mother remarked about school discipline in which "the children are marched around like animals." She

says, "Some mothers who have seen how their children act seem to feel as though their children need this type of treatment."

This same mother continues, "Many mothers don't like to send their children to a predominantly Negro school and I get awfully disgusted when I see families move away because they don't want to send their kids to school with my boy." This mother's alienation is not so great that she cannot continue to fight but she expresses the deep hurt that comes when people are rejected because of color. She continues, "It's just been within the last two years that I feel as a Negro, because I grew up in a white society, and there is, well, there are differences made because of the color of my skin and I don't want my children to come through it. I want them as soon as they realize there is a difference to have a pride in what they are, and to learn to judge people on what they have to give and not because of their color or what they believe in and things like this."

Isolation

Isolation is felt as self-estrangement and as a "hemming in" by the complexity and unsuitability of urban living.

Self-estrangement is often expressed by the poor who have uprooted themselves from other cultures and find themselves inhabitants in a strange land with strange faces. A Japanese wife of a member of the Armed Services says, "I do not know who I am any more. Everything is so different from when I lived in Japan. No one cares to listen to me, not even my husband. I have no telephone, for my hus-

band says I don't know anyone to call me."

This woman's life consists of her three rooms and the going and coming to nursery school. Before nursery school she had only her three rooms. She does not go to church. Her husband never takes her out. She has no visitors. As a result of her environment being so limited, a real sense of self-estrangement has developed. Until she enrolled her child in nursery school she was living in unbelievable inward and outward isolation.

Many of the poor have children closely spaced, so it is not unusual for a mother to have three or four preschool children. These children spend most of their time within the four walls of a small, poorly furnished, poorly lighted dwelling. When asked, "Where do the children play?" the typical answer is, "He very seldom gets outside." The time is typically spent looking at TV, often in a darkened room. The contrast between the TV diet that is witnessed many hours a day and the drab surroundings that constitute life heightens the distance between fantasy and reality and must add tremendously to the isolation that is felt.

One mother answered this way to the question, "Where do your children play?" "Well, there isn't a place for them to play. There would be a little place but the people don't pick up the garbage and my boys will just dig in it so as a rule they usually stay in. Sometimes I sit with them on the steps in the sunshine."

We seldom take into account the large numbers of urban dwellers who do not feel at home amidst a sea of concrete. Not all of these are from

overseas. The extensive migration of rural people to the cities during the last World War left pockets of alienated people who have continued living in the hastily constructed barracks of the early 1940's. Two such pockets exist in the Bay Area and each of them is a boiling cauldron of unrest—a potential Watts. In each of these pockets a deep sense of isolation from the community at large is felt. Often extensive efforts are made to protect this isolation for it has become a precious quality of life that makes tolerable the alienation from the mainstream by furnishing some tie for binding people together.

Often the language of the alienated poor deepens the quality of isolation. It is not understood (even though it may be a dialect of so-called Standard English) by the institutions which make up the fabric of our social structure, and which are perceived as wielding power. So, when a mother takes her baby to the clinic she is bewildered by the advice given and may find her-

self unable to carry out the doctor's orders, for the two of them have *not* communicated.

When a mother goes to school to see about her child's behavior she becomes self-conscious when the teacher frequently asks her to repeat, for she becomes aware that the teacher just doesn't follow what she is saying. When she receives a report card saying that Tommy's language is deficient and he is being assigned to a remedial class and yet his language sounds fine to her ears, again a wall is built between the home and school.

How many walls we have and how we have built them can only be deeply understood by prodigious efforts to communicate real feelings with one another. The alienated poor are alienated from themselves, from each other, and from productive activity. A sense of *caring* has to be established before any of these depreciating aspects of alienation are connected into valuing the human being for what he is and what he can become. 

Language and Social Needs

Living and learning are synonyms and all the "stuff" of life is instructional material. The development of thinking processes neither precedes nor follows language development but occurs as an oscillation; new terms trigger new relationships which lead to other words for handling new concepts. All youngsters need to develop a language that will go beyond immediate social and material needs to usages that will help them to share ideas, control their own behavior and engage in the processes of thinking.

From: Martin Haberman. "Materials the Disadvantaged Need—and Don't Need." See page 611.

Copyright © 1967 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.