

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE UNDERSTANDING

By Sam Schulman*

In working with migrant families the health community--as well as teachers, ministers, labor union representative, welfare workers: in all, members of the "helping" disciplines--have encountered problems. If there were no problems there would be little need to invest time, personnel, and expenses involved in conferences and institutes dedicated to trying to resolve some of them. Many of these, our problems, revolve around a common rubric: "lack of effective understanding." The misunderstanding is generally a two-way proposition: they (the migrants) do not understand us, and we (the helpers) do not understand them. It is certainly evident that there are cases, involving some of all of us, some of the time, that this situation does not obtain: there are, indeed, episodes of true harmony. But it is not the general rule. The fact that misunderstanding rather than understanding is encountered disturbingly often explains our presence here. What is of significance to us is that we know that misunderstanding is a prelude to poor, ineffective, or non-enduring human interrelationships.

*Professor of Sociology, Colorado State University, and Consultant to the Migrant Health Branch, Division of Community Health Services, United States Public Health Service.

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In an hypothetical ideal sense, there are two (or possibly more) identifiable entities in the process of misunderstanding: the "we" and the "they" components. Our analytical approach then shall be concentrated in an evaluation of the "we" and the "they" and the situation, or context, that brings them together in a manner that demands their working together. The questions of concern, then, are: "Who are we?", "Who are they?", "What are the dynamics of our common contact?", "How can we resolve, remedy, or ameliorate the misunderstanding that exists between us and, consequently, our interrelationships?" To these questions I shall address this paper.

Who are we?

At first glance this may appear a superfluous, if not an inane, question. We supposedly know who we are. But oftentimes we don't really. Each one of us is the encumbent of many parts, or roles: we wear many hats. The hat we wear on one occasion may be alien, exotic, if not downright ridiculous in another. Let us use a case in point: the warm physical mass of sap and sinew that is my person.

To those at this meeting I am a consultant to the Migrant Health Branch of the Public Health Service. To several hundred young men and women back in Fort Collins, Colorado, I am a professor. To my professional colleagues I am a sociologist. To more limited groups within the sociological community I am a "medical" sociologist, a specialist in "development" or in "Latin America." To my banker I am "of the middle-income group." To my old college chums I am "that passing fair pinochle player" or "one of those singers of sad songs." To my children I am "Daddy." And to my wife I am "the old sour puss." And I could go on, for there are many hats that I wear. Each one of us wears many hats.

Each one of us enacts many social roles, and the composite of these roles is our social person. We must compartmentalize these roles: we usually don't get them mixed up. Yet, we must realize that they all exist and are part of us.

Herein, perhaps, lies the seed of our first major problem. Some of the things we are we cannot but carry over into a situation that really calls for the enactment of a single dominant role. As an example: a teacher of a group of migrant children in the third grade. She is entrusted with this task of the education of fifty children, early in May, children who have been taken from other schools in other places so that their families may make a living by following the crops. So, here is our teacher: white, around twenty-three, a university graduate, Protestant, highly motivated. She shall have these children as her wards for only a few weeks. Her presumed level of instruction is the third grade, but she finds that most of her children can barely write their names and cannot read, even minimally well, without her assistance. Her basic role - that of teacher- is difficult enough. But she finds that she cannot compartmentalize herself in this single difficult role. She feels that she wants her students to be clean, for few of them are "clean" as she understands the word. Most have skin infections and, on their hands and faces, blots of infection are caked over with accumulated dirt. She wants them to brush their teeth. She wants them to sit properly so that their spines will not be bent. She wants them to go to church and learn some moral principles, and internalize them, for she has seen them at play, and some of that is sheer sexual game-playing, especially among the older children. Need we go on? Need we say that our little "Miss Third Grade Teacher" is involved in a situation in which she is much more than "teacher,"

and that she will wear many hats during the course of the day, sometimes several hats at the same time, none fitting too well.

We bring to any interactive situation, first of all, ourselves. And who are we? It would be to reduce to an absurdity a definition of ourselves that included every common denominator we possess: they would be few and really quite meaningless for us to use them as a basis of action. If all of us were women, or Roman Catholics, or left-handed; any of these would provide us with a list in our collective minds of things we would (or could) do and another list of things we wouldn't (or couldn't) do. We are, however, a collectivity with certain common denominators that can provide us with an overall picture of ourselves, which most of the time would fit most of us.

We are generally white which, regardless of social legislation and Supreme Court verdicts, still has sociological significance in the Southeastern part of the United States. We are motivated to work for or with migrant laborers. In this part of the country it would not be remiss to state that we are mostly Protestants, and mostly Protestants of fairly conservative persuasion. Most of us who work with migrants would be classified as professionals or sub-professionals, typically university graduates or those who have had special training which would be the equivalent of university education. Most of us would identify ourselves, and would be identified by others, as members of that difficult stratum of American life we call "the middle class." Many of those present have a rural or semi-rural background and think that Chicago, and New York, or even Raleigh would be "nice places to visit" but "we wouldn't want to be from" there. We all, most significantly, want to break down barriers to effective communication with another collectivity -- the migrants.

The Migrants: Who are they?

It has been a necessity throughout the United States that rural production of any kind is linked to such ubiquitous conditions as general climate, topography, amount of rainfall and when it falls, soil types, availability of machine and hand labor. Some crops, such as the grains, require very little hand labor and depend greatly on machines for plowing, planting, weeding, tending, and harvesting. Other crops must depend more on hand labor, and yet other crops--such as most of our truck crops, fruits, and berries--need the special sensitivity of human minds and human hands a great deal of the time. On the other hand, some of these latter crops need this human mental-tactile facility only at certain times. One such time is "harvest." A fairly large number of human helpers must be available, and at a specific time, or certain crops cannot be harvested. In a nutshell, this demands a corps of workers who are available at peak harvest in various parts of the country and at various times during the year. Herein lies the genesis of the migratory streams: corps of available farm helpers who move with crops. It may seem impossible, but the tomatoes of northern Ohio and the cherries of central Michigan would, in large measure, rot on the vines and trees if some farm laborers did not move there for a few weeks or months from the deepest parts of Texas. Seasonal farm work requires seasonal farm laborers. We no longer produce wheat, berries, apricots, and asparagus just for home use. Our peak seasonal gathering of such products makes it possible for there to be fresh strawberry pies in Anchorage, Alaska; apricot preserves may be marketed in Indio, California; fresh asparagus covered in a cream sauce are served at expensive restaurants in New York; and Kansas wheat makes for part of your bread everywhere in the United States and

in countless countries beyond our borders.

The key to seasonal farming is the migrant worker. But who is he? He is someone who must leave his home and follow the crops. But this, alone, is another meaningless common denominator. Let us take a closer look. He is, first of all, poor. He is poor in his home community and would be poorer if he stayed there. He takes his poverty on the road so that it would not be even greater than it is. About a million migrants, workers and their families, make the trek south to north, every year. They begin typically in the deep South (and these are mostly Negroes), or in the border areas of Texas and Mexico (and these are mostly Spanish-speaking). For many years West Indians were imported for work in the Florida cane-fields, and Mexican nationals - braceros - followed a two-pronged stream through the Middle West and into California, Oregon, and Washington. Most foreign contracted seasonal labor has now considerably diminished, and American citizens (or resident aliens) have continued the streams.

Here, in North Carolina, the migrant is chiefly Negro, but he is still a poverty-stricken Negro. A smaller number of whites and Puerto Ricans also share this movable poverty.

Poverty is a way of life, one forced upon its victims, one from which the Negro has little or no opportunity to escape. Even where he has made the "permanent" move from the South to a Northern city, he is thrown into the ranks of those competing for menial jobs, and finds his new "home" in the Negro ghettos of these cities. The Southern Negro farm laborer who becomes a migrant takes his "culture of poverty" with him. It is a rude thing. It permits for laxity in even a minimally demanding moral code. He spends a greater share of his income than he can afford for hard drink, and is often in debt to those like

himself. His family lives on a fat-heavy, protein-light diet, and his children drink more Coca-Cola than milk. His religion is of the deeply evangelical variety with semi-literate preachers pounding simple images and concepts from a Bible he and they can barely understand. He is not just a Baptist or Methodist, but a "shouting" Baptist or Methodist. The migrant's work week may be punctuated by bouts of hard revelry. He is the Negro poor, and besides, he is the rootless Negro poor. He has little knowledge or experience with "community life," because he has been excluded from, and excludes himself, from the community. His women bear large numbers of children, most of whom suffer from some type of sickness--impetigo, diarrheas, undernourishment. Little, typically is done to alleviate these conditions. To the migrant mother, they may be considered "normal."

The dynamics of contact.

Let us make one thing quite certain. Those of us interested in the wellbeing of the migrant and his family, have initiated and sustained most contacts with them. Certainly, there are migrant mothers who attend well-child clinics regularly, but it was "introduced" to them directly or indirectly by us. We have sought our contacts with them; perhaps we have imposed our contacts upon them. A migrant minister does not hang out a shingle in a camp stating "James Smith, Minister to Migrants." Reverend Smith goes out of his way to seek out troubled souls. Nor, to begin with, did Sally Jones, P.H.N., set up clinic-keeping in a migrant camp and wait patiently for patients to walk in. Nurse Jones had to beat the bushes for clients. Public welfare workers, physicians, teachers--the lot of us--have sought out the migrant and his family, chiefly because of our desire to help. How does the primitively religious migrant woman realize the God is

her Father as well as the Father of the "higher ups," and does his Fatherliness mean the same to her as to the Reverend Smith? How well does she understand the often complex germ theory of disease as Nurse Jones explains the benefits of a D.P.T. inoculation for her baby? What good does the migrant family see in school for their children when they cannot reap its immediate benefits, nor can they see any long-time life-chances for their semi-literate children.

The situation of contact between migrant families and members of the helping professions is one that is essentially artificial. By the rules of social conduct, we would not usually seek out migrants as our friends, nor would they seek our company. Through the authority granted to us by the law, or the clamoring of our own consciences, do we initiate and maintain these contacts. We, representing the greater community, do not wish all to be threatened with a diphtheria epidemic that may break out in a migrant camp. We, of the greater community, recognize that our laws are a sacred heritage, and we do not wish them to be challenged by these necessary transient lodgers in our community. While the migrants are in these communities of ours, they are not our guests: they are with us, not of us. They are necessary sojourners. We take no pride in them, nor they in us. Situations of contact with migrants and members of the helping professions are situations of convenience--our convenience.

Why do we misunderstand one another?

The question we ask at this time is, perhaps, not really needed. From the foregoing it is obvious that misunderstanding takes place. It is almost inevitable.

Many years ago the social psychologist Kurt Lewin noted that each

of us lives in what he diagrammed as a "life space." Each of our life spaces may be congruent with that of others, and it is on this basis that we can form associations, friendships, mergers, marriages, and the like. On the following page is a generalized diagram of the group life space of the migrant, chiefly the Negro migrant, and of the white members of the helping professions. Note that in this model the area of congruence between the "we's" and the "they's" is a bare overlap in the area of economic activities. Diagrammatically this is the only area where our conceptions, preconceptions, norms of behavior, value systems, and behaviors coincide. "We" know what to expect of them, they of "us." It is understood that, as an example, a worker must pick a certain number of a crop to be paid a certain amount in wages. A migrant will not pick more for this amount, and his employer will pay him no less than the agreed amount. It is also understood--in the non-economic sphere--that the paymaster should be addressed as "mister," even if the "mister" is followed by a given name, and that the worker should be addressed by his given name directly, his surname directly, or even as "boy" (even though he is fifty years old). These illustrations, as well as many others, are "acceptable" because they fall within the area of congruence, and this area is not large. There is, on the other hand, much incongruence.

Let us take the example of patterns of child-rearing. The typical white middle-class child is a "wanted" child and, in general, is planned for. (Of course, I know there are "accidents." To the best of my knowledge, I was an "accident" late in the child-bearing history of my mother.) Professional middle-class people, even those whose religion may proscribe the use of mechanical contraception, try to plan their families. It is not unusual for us to hear of how child-

ren are "spaced" so that all are not in college or in the armed services at the same time--and this while the children are still toddlers or, in some cases, even before they are born. Consider now, the attitudes regarding having children of the poverty-ridden, generally ignorant and poorly educated Negro migrant family. A child is almost always welcomed, but he is typically not planned for. He may, in fact, be the product of a rather casual union. The white middle-class child is carefully nurtured--the baby foods, the special formulae, the medical check-ups, the concern for proper growth and weight gain, the "Dr. Spock" baby. The child of the poor Negro family grows as he can: there are few special formulas, few baby foods, and only a rare "Dr. Spock" baby. He grows as he can, toddles and plays with many less "no-no's" than his middle-class white counterpart. I do not wish to perpetuate the myth of the fatherless Negro home, but it is certainly true that a Negro farmhand who works from pre-dawn to sundown has little time to play with and fondle his child and, when relaxing time comes, he prefers adult company to his baby. This does not mean that he is a bad father; he is a father who fulfills the expectations of his role within the poor Negro family.

In each phase or discussion of the life space of the white middle-class and the Negro lower-class we find major, if not radical, differences. This would be the case if we were to compare our lifestyles with those of any poverty-ridden people: the Puerto Ricans, the Spanish-speaking migrants, what-have-you.

How to remedy or ameliorate misunderstanding?

A rather simple statement, so simple that its ease of statement may easily confound the intensity of its meaning, gives us the guide-

lines to the amelioration of problems. "Problems" may run the gamut of the threat of a total war of annihilation to a rather mild dispute over some minor incident in the relationships between husband and wife. Our basic problem is "How do we overcome the lack of effective interaction between migrants and those who seek to help them?"

The simple rule is this: If two or more parties are in discord, disagreement, dissension, conflict, and the like, better relationships can be achieved if: A) there is greater knowledge of the two or more points-of-view involved, and B) that there is sufficient motivation to end or mitigate the discord in a mutually satisfactory manner.

We began our discussion with the fact that we face barriers in effective interaction between us (the helpers) and them (the migrants). For many reasons it is best to assume that of the two groups that of "the helpers" is more flexible in its attitudes and in its behaviors. I am saying that we should be the first to move to dissolve or minimize the barriers. Because of our superior education, our better life chances, our desire to help, we should expand our already established high motivation, and make more profound our knowledge. The high motivation, indeed, we have, or we would not be here. But our ignorance of the people we seek to serve is profound. We must, then, make more effort in understanding the lifeways of the migrant. Intellectually we must stand in his shoes and see through his eyes.

If what we see is in sharp contradistinction to what we believe to be correct, or beautiful, or approvable, let us remember that we are not standing in our shoes, but theirs. We must, as the psychologists would tell us, sublimate our own manners of thinking, of sensing, of acting. This is to understand.

But we are interested in change as well as in understanding. We

want these people to have a better life than they have: we want them healthier; we want them to better their children's intellectual potential; we want to see them as contributing members of our total society. In this regard, knowing them better allows us to look for the "loopholes" in the way they see life, wherein we might enter. Let us assume, for the moment, that we are all "Madison Avenue types," and we have a product to offer the average housewife--say, a new detergent. (We know, of course, that our detergent is really not any better than twenty other brands already on the market.) First, we study intensively the purchasing habits of the housewife-shopper, especially as regards detergents. Then, we plan an idea-influencing campaign (in the armed services this used to be called psychological warfare). We find that women like single-word names, and that they like these words to be descriptive of something they find pleasing or exciting. So we try several names for our product: "Smooth," "Velvet," "Soft," or, on the other hand, "Double White," "Zing," "Flash," and "Explode!" We find, again by painstaking analysis, that "Flash" is a good name. We know that other detergents have added bluing power or bleach in little crystals of blue or green. We then choose red - something different - to do the same thing. "The little red dots of "Flash" give you the whitest and the brightest underwear in the neighborhood!" Need we go on?

Let us return, for a moment, to our diagrams of the life spaces of the typical white, middle-class "helper" and the typical Negro, poverty-ridden migrant.

If, indeed, we are seeking to terminate all possible discord between the two, we would seek to bring about greater and greater areas of congruence. But we are not seeking to assimilate one life

space into the other: This would certainly eliminate culturally-based discord, since all would be not only congruent, but the same. This is far from our goal. We wish to broaden the present area of congruence and, if possible, find other areas of congruence with the expressed idea of making life better for the migrant worker. We wish to maintain the identities of the two life spaces but, where possible, to bring them closer together. In effect, we would like to try to change the internal structure of the life space to look more like our life space, to find greater areas of congruence between them, yet for each to maintain its own identity. A first, and most important step, in this direction is looking at the migrant's life space with greater profundity than we usually have. The "loopholes" we seek cannot be seen unless we examine the entire structure of his life. We must all, in our own ways, be "Madison Avenue types" in selling good health, good moral attitudes, good citizenship.

Through our understanding of migrant culture, of the migrant's way of seeing things, we can find the "loopholes". What are the "loopholes" that can lead to cleanliness, preventive medicine, a greater commitment to religion, a greater effort to improve children's education, a greater understanding of birth control, a better use of public and private agencies available to them for their own betterment. This is our chore: to find better ways of serving our people--for they are our people--and to do this as efficiently as we can. And when we look for resources upon which we may depend, we find that our first, and best, and most willing resources are ourselves.

