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Self-Reparenting with Female Delinquents in Jail

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Abstract

This paper is based on a research project using self-reparenting techniques (James, 1974, 1981, 1985, 1987) with female delinquents in prison in Mexico. The aim of the work was to prove the generalizability and usefulness of self-reparenting through demonstrating systematic replicability. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in the teenager's behavior, and as a result of this success, the program has become part of the ongoing treatment program at the female juvenile jail in Mexico City.

“What Can You Expect from Me if You Think I'm Incurrable?”

One of the worst things that can happen to children is to believe the negative attributions ascribed to them by some parental figures. This is the case for a number of teenagers in the juvenile jails in Mexico City, many of whom are there because they have been accused by their parents of being incurrable. Once this label is included in their official police and school files, their lives are altered significantly. If asked why they are in jail, these girls often answer, “Because I am incurrable.”

This attribution has dramatic consequences for these youngsters. Often it means a hopeless position in life, although the girls themselves are usually not aware of the long-range implications of this “diagnosis.” In addition, they do not realize that their behavior may be justified or understood in relation to the context in which they live and as a reaction to negative environmental stimuli.

This awareness led me to think of using transactional analysis (TA) at the jail. I saw TA as a way to sensitize these girls to the effects of harmful parental messages and to teach them options for change. Self-reparenting (James, 1974) was selected as the treatment technique because it seemed necessary to restructure the

Parent ego states of these young people. Their clinical histories revealed a lack of positive parental figures, poor role models, and a need to learn how to be responsible for themselves and how eventually to be good mothers.

Self-reparenting is a theory and technique for helping clients take responsibility for reprogramming their Parent ego state so they function as better parents to themselves (James, 1987). It was used to design a one-week workshop for girls in the juvenile jail with the hope that this introduction to TA therapy would serve as motivation for further individual psychotherapy.

In the workshop, participants identified their main problems and issues for treatment. The girls accepted some responsibility for their situation and became aware of ways to make positive changes in their scripts. They also came to terms with themselves and their lives, which was important for improving their self-esteem and for making behavioral changes. The workshop focused on helping the girls to break free from their past and to learn to be loving parents to themselves. It included both theory and a treatment process in which one replaces old, inadequate messages from childhood with new, positive ones that encourage independence and self-esteem. The goal was to help the girls decide that their behavior could be changed and that they deserve to consider themselves as people worthy of respect with worthwhile values. In addition, we sought to enable the girls to believe that they deserve love and are able to give and receive love.

Method

For many years Emilio Said and I have used self-reparenting workshops to facilitate positive change with middle-class adults. The goal of this study was to demonstrate that the self-reparenting technique can also be useful for promoting change in juvenile delinquents. The intention was to prove the technique's generalizability and usefulness through systematic replicability

(Sidman, 1960). This means that the technique has the possibility of providing clear and consistent results with different populations. Sidman discussed two classes of replicability: direct replicability, in which the data is reproduced under the same conditions, thus helping to establish the generalizability of a phenomenon with the same type of subjects, and systematic replicability, in which the results are repeated under clearly different conditions. This extends the generalizability of the phenomenon in question to various situations.

Participants

The workshop consisted of two groups that met at the same time. Two additional cotherapists were trained to lead the second group, and ongoing supervision and close coordination was maintained between the two pairs of cotherapists. The participants were 28 females between 13 and 18 years of age and one 11-year-old.

The Program

To start the workshop, the leader established a warm environment by providing a luncheon for the participants. Afterward, the first session began with each girl introducing herself and telling what her name meant to her. In addition, the girls were invited to share things they liked about themselves. The workshop continued with a step-by-step process, with each step containing specific exercises. The following is a brief overview of the process of the self-reparenting treatment program (James, 1987):

1. *Awareness of the need for a new Parent:* The initial discussion focused on a warm-up question: "How would you be different now if you had had ideal parents?" This question addressed the girls' need to be good parents to themselves. A brief overview of ego state theory was also presented.

2. *Historical diagnosis of Parent figures:* The girls analyzed negative parenting styles and role played each style: argumentative, emotionally needy, inconsistent, overcritical, overprotective, super-organized, and uninvolved.

3. *Parenting education:* Positive parenting styles were analyzed, discussed, and illustrated with examples. The styles included: caring, consistent, encouraging, peace-making, reasonable,

relaxed, and responsible.

4. *Recognizing the inner Child:* The groups then conducted exercises and were provided with explanations for identifying the different styles of obedience to authority: learning to obey; choosing to rebel, and procrastination responses.

5. *Dialogue between the ideal Parent and Child:* The girls explored the difference between needs and wants and the problem of being enslaved by unmet needs. Exercises that facilitated an internal dialogue with the inner Child were conducted.

6. *Forgiving parents and forgiving self:* The importance of and the challenges to forgiving were discussed. Participants were invited to write forgiving letters to their parents and to themselves.

7. *Contracts:* Contracting for freedom using the James formula was explored, and all group members wrote personal contracts.

8. *Positive reinforcement:* Group members explored the use of hope for improving their lives, and the importance of play and work was discussed. Each girl discovered ways to enjoy herself, an important step in planning a better future. In addition, each wrote a letter from her new Parent to her inner Child to solidify changes and commitment.

9. *Celebrating change!* The workshop ended with a party celebrating the changes that had occurred.

Results

The results of the self-reparenting program were evaluated in the following ways:

1. A daily log was kept of behavioral changes noticed in the workshop by staff psychologists who were acting as observers.

2. A record was kept comparing each girl's behavior and attitude outside the workshop as noted by the staff psychologists and the jail staff.

3. A personal testimony was written by each girl at the end of the workshop in response to the question, "How was the self-reparenting workshop useful for you?"

4. The girls' final testimonies were compared to their initial presentations.

5. The girls' final testimonies were compared to their history as shown in their personal files.

Positive changes were observed in all the girls except one who remained resistant. (She was involved in drug abuse, which required specialized treatment.) With the rest of the group, the following changes were observed:

1. Conflict decreased with parents, and the girls were interested in continuing to explore their relationships with their parents.
2. Resistance to treatment decreased, and there was an increase in the realization of the need to continue growing through individual therapy.
3. Their capacity for insight and their consciousness of being responsible for their own lives increased.
4. Aggressive verbal and acting-out behavior decreased.
5. Self-esteem as demonstrated by feelings of joy, confidence, and hope increased.
6. Recognition of their own value and identity as women increased.
7. Letting go of passivity and showing interest in and motivation for getting on with their new life goals increased.
8. Beginning to learn how to give and receive love and refusing to accept labels such as "incorrigible" increased.

Discussion

The results of this study are relevant for both theoreticians and researchers interested in the use of TA psychotherapy, especially when short-term treatment is required. Unfortunately, with this study it was not possible to have a control research design because of time limitations imposed by jail authorities. At the time the study was done, doing research or teaching a new psychotherapy technique in the jail was difficult because one had to deal first with resistance from the administrative staff, who tried to sabotage the project out of ignorance or personal interests. However, by the end of the workshop, the staff, who had observed the therapy process, had also changed and was interested in learning more about the self-reparenting technique. We therefore began doing TA training and supervision with the psychologists and social workers who worked there. Since then the self-reparenting workshop has become part of the ongoing treatment at the female juvenile jail.

With regard to further research, it would be useful to have a control group run at the same time and to measure self-esteem before and after the workshop using a standardized test with both treatment and control groups. Also, tape recording the process is recommended as a basis for describing clinical interventions in specific cases. Finally, a three-month or more follow-up of the study is also recommended.

Conclusion

The study described here supports the conclusion that self-reparenting is a useful technique for promoting behavioral changes with juvenile delinquents and further that it is useful with different populations. This work was based on self-reparenting theory and technique as originally developed by James (1974, 1981, 1985, 1987) and adapted by Said and Noriega for the Latin-American culture and further by Noriega (1990) for work with juvenile delinquents. Further research with this powerful technique is warranted.

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