

Stigmata and Misperceptions as a Source of Aggression among Students: Educational Proposals for Intervention

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Abstract

The unequal distribution of social and cultural goods between social sectors and the existence of different socioeconomic cultural strata create a partition in the social system where the parts have different perceptions about the others and themselves. This is a source of aggressive behavior provoked by stigmatized perceptions between the parts.

In the present work the presence of stigmata in our society and the ways in which students apply these stigmata for building aggressive peer relationships is discussed. We propose a hierarchical framework of analysis with three levels: the society level, the peer's group level and the individual level. In this analysis we will distinguish between proper social stigmata and the normal forms of relating among adolescents, that several studies have found studying the "peer micro culture." According to this analysis we review three intervention strategies for enhancing the social development of the students.¹⁾

Keywords: aggressive behavior, social stigma, teenager's education

Introduction

The unequal distribution of social and cultural goods between social sectors and the existence of different socioeconomic cultural strata create a partition in the social system where the parts have different beliefs, values and perceptions about the others and themselves. This is a source of aggressive behavior provoked by stigmatized perceptions between the parts.

Serrano Pintado (1996) referring to social learning theory states that aggressive behavior can be learned by imitation and observation of aggressive models. (1996:34-35). According to Zaczek (1998), the social context influences the subject to imitate certain types of behavior that are selected as models.

As an educational institution, the school faces the great challenge and commitment to contemporary society to contribute in rebuilding the social fabric, integrating the partitioned social system for a better living together, because in the classrooms, in addition to transmitting the knowledge of language, science and history, daily induces in children and young people, the ways of being, of relating to others by means of rules, disciplinary procedures and criteria guided by the values and traditions established by the school culture. These procedures and criteria relate to organizational forms that have implicit in the focus of their actions a certain way of thinking about the student (Velázquez, 2006).

Because of the need to plan its educational activities, to have a regulatory framework, as well as its social and cultural moral authority, the school has the potential to be a place where students are educated to social life. This institutional status let us to ask the following

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questions: how can we ensure that students respect the ways of being and personal differences of their peers, when they observe in the society the categorization of people, the recognition of someone and the exclusion of others, the conflict and the individualism? How to wake up their social sensibility and to get the skills to engage with others, in the construction of a community they feel part of?

This integration process requires a critical reflection to identify the social structures, the beliefs and prejudices that generate the conflict, the submission, the exclusion and the discrimination in the partitioned social system.

We argue that the categorization of people roots in the structure of our multicultural society. There exist important disqualifying attributes that are disseminated in the society. According to Goffman (1963) the stigma arises and is based on a widespread social attitude of those who belong to a given dominant category. They routinely treat "others" as possessing a negative disqualifying attribute perceived by them that provokes their rejection.

Therefore we analyzed the social disqualifiers that are used by students as a means of aggression at school, through the concept of social stigma (Goffman 1963) and the social learning theory of Serrano (1996) and Zaczek (1998).

Then we identified educational processes that would help the school to deconstruct models of aggression learned by students and the reconstruction of social meanings based on a three level systemic analysis at the social, group and personal level. It is important to take into account the social as well as the group level in the analysis of student behavior because it leads to educational work instead of considering only a psychological treatment of the problem.

c) Finally, we reviewed three educational intervention procedures in adolescents proposed by Latinamerican researchers.

The Social Stigmata

Our research (Velázquez & Escobedo 2008) was conducted in a public school, located in southern Mexico City. Teachers are professionals in the basic education system, and the student parents belong to different social strata such as: employees, professionals, traders, domestic workers, and construction workers.

The investigation was carried out through an ethnographic method, recording in detail the discursive interactions in conflict situations among students in the playground and between students and teacher in the classroom. The students were aged between 11 and 14.

The multicultural student structure was modeled in terms of Social Network Analysis as a set of social actors belonging to different social strata as the vertices of the network and a set of relationships between actors as the links of the network. Some of these relationships are similarity links defining an affinity network, where affinity clusters of similar actors may be identified. On the other side there are dissimilarity relationships between actors derived from their belonging to different cultural and socioeconomic strata. A class of these dissimilarity relationships is the stigmatic rejection. It is based on a dyadic relationship: the active (discrediting) agent, the passive (discredited) agent and the stigma disqualifying relationship. This disqualifying attribute is however for the most part only a misperception based on a social gap between virtual perception and reality. Moreover, the stigma is a dynamic relationship that disseminates in a social network through social learning.

This conceptual perspective was confirmed in our research (Velazquez & Escobedo 2008), where we found in the discursive interactions between students the presence of these dyadic stigmatizing relationships. Some of the disqualifying attributes are "cholo" (Indian), "naco"

(low class), "resbalosa" (promiscuous girl). These disqualifying words prevent the mutual knowledge and the approach to the discriminated actor as a person because the stigma assigns the partner a learned pre-determined social classification. This same problem is found by Nashiki (2005), in adolescent students, when they try to disqualify the masculinity of another boy as "mariquita" (effeminate), or pejorative racial classifications as "Indian", "black", or social class as "naco".

On the other side, Dexter (1980) and Aguilera, Muñoz & Orozco (2007:153) also report the use of inappropriate language among students, but not as a form of aggression, but a natural way to communicate among peers.

It is important to note two aspects to consider at looking for a critical socialization of students. The first one is that these stigmata are found in the personal relationships in the broad social context, feeding the patterns of behavior and actions toward others. The second aspect is that such models are observed, listened, reiterated and learned in the social interaction. This learning determines an a priori representation and categorization of people that is disseminated to others. Consequently, the other person is treated in a predetermined way, without really knowing her. As a consequence, these stigmata are a source of conflict in the school living together. They are patterns of behavior that must be dealt educationally with procedures that take into account their origin, structure and operation.

The Intervention Proposals

In order to reflect on the deconstruction of stereotypes and the reconstruction of social meanings in the students at the social, group and personal level, we will review three educational intervention procedures in adolescents.

The first proposal was developed by Alfredo Ghiso (1999), for social and cognitive reorientation of youth groups. At the society level Ghiso proposes to help students to analyze the structural and social causes of conflict that manifest themselves in different spaces of everyday life, such as, family, school and youth groups and to identify conflict-generating sites, as well as common meeting places of agreement and dialogue. According to our social network analysis he tries to deconstruct the dissimilarity relationships existing among students, finding the required levels of convergence to communicate, discuss, negotiate and interact jointly. He considers the conflict as a dynamic component of the training process and the resulting significant learning.

At the peer's group level Garaigordobil (2007) proposes de-structuring stigmata and prejudices, questioning what the students consider valid beliefs and perceptions in order to find mechanisms to encourage the change of misperceptions.

Garaigordobil addresses the social, cognitive and affective development of the teenager around his negative social behavior such as prejudices and stereotypes. The proposal concerns the following aspects: a) To help students to identify and analyze their perceptions and beliefs about reality, fostering openness of thought. b) To help students to experience the physiological and psychological limitations of perception, by analyzing it, as well as beliefs and prejudices. They must contrast their own perceptions with others; reflect on the origin of the perceptions, on their impact on behavior and on mechanisms that can promote to change stereotyped misperceptions. c) To clarify the concept of cliché or stereotype, showing the erroneous trend to build clichés about the reality with insufficient information. d) To differentiate facts and opinions and to recognize the group dynamics when disqualifying another group, as well as the mechanisms that disguise prejudices. e) To discuss the procedures that can help to change negative perceptions, discrimination and xenophobia.

A pre-test as well as a post-test are applied. The issues are worked by applying mainly group dynamics, ad hoc activities, discussion or debate about the activities under the coordination of the moderator.

Valenzuela M L et al (2003) is a manual for teachers that is oriented to the creative resolution of conflicts. It recommends at the individual level a set of activities to be undertaken with students to develop empathy, respect for others and appreciation for diversity. It also supports educational mediation, negotiation and dialogue.

It is not directed particularly to the problem of stigmata and stereotypes as such. It is oriented to develop empathy, respect and appreciation for the difference, as part of many other responsibilities. It claims that empathy is "the ability to step into the shoes of the other", imagining how is his life as well as careful listening. The development of these capabilities enables the acceptance of different people. With regard to respect for others, the manual states that it is important to recognize the existence and individuality of others without making value judgements, stigmatize or label their actions and thoughts.

As the appreciation for diversity, the manual claims that it comes from the ability to recognize that human beings are unique and unrepeatable and the differences of race, creed, gender, disability and ideology must be accepted and valued.

The educational means that Valenzuela et al. propose to develop skills that promote conflict resolution are: diagnosis and monitoring, practicing what you learn, learning orientation, arbitration, mediation, negotiation and dialogue. The educational principle is to learn in the interaction. because you learn when you incorporate new knowledge, attitudes, skills and values with others in order to transform reality for a better world.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to answer the question of how can we enable students to respect the ways of being and personal differences of their peers, when they observe in their social environment multiple ways of categorizing people, recognizing some of them and excluding others. and the prevalence of conflict and individualism.

According to Goffman (1963), stigmata are based on widespread social prejudices, leading us to treat the "others" with a pre-learned, biased look, which prevents to look at people objectively in its entirety. Stigmata spread through social networks and lead to exclusion and to harm others. They invade our virtual perception and prevent a real understanding of the other. However we must take into account the nuance that Dexter (1980) introduces about to consider the rude behavior of adolescents as part of the socialization through the peer's group.

Ghiso's proposal (1999), asking the students to analyze the structural causes of conflict, manifested in the social relationships, can treat the upper social level as a source of many of the conflicting behaviors. His objective is to influence the social and cognitive orientation of youth groups. working together for the analysis, preparation of responses, and sharing of collective knowledge.

Garaigordobil (2007) proposes at the peer's group level the de-structuring of stigmata and prejudices, questioning what the students consider valid beliefs and perceptions in order to find mechanisms to encourage the change of misperceptions. She also identifies through analysis and reflection carried out by the group through group dynamics, the breeding sites of the stigmata as facts and opinions as mechanisms that disguise the prejudices.

Valenzuela M L et al (2003) presents issues that cause conflict in relationships, and recommends to build up in the student a set of competencies for its management. It

recommends at the individual level a set of activities to be undertaken with students to develop empathy, respect for others and appreciation for diversity. It also supports educational mediation, negotiation and dialogue. This manual proposes activities to be undertaken with students to develop empathy, respect for others and appreciation for diversity.

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