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Pragmatic Abilities in Juvenile Delinquents

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Introduction

The on-going exchange of messages, in one form or another, connects all living creatures in a never ending circle. Birds do it, honey bees do it, but it is only in humans that we find language being used as a most remarkably facile means of sharing information. And, although other modalities also are utilized, speech is the most common and important way in which we use language to communicate. The act of communication is a process, not an entity. It consists of the transfer of a message from a sender to a receiver. The message may be verbal, non verbal,

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chemical, electromagnetic, and so on. In the case of humans, the basic unit of communication typically involves a speaker and one or more listeners.

While all living creatures communicate, only human exchange information using a code that we call language. Only the human species has devised an elaborate system of shared symbols and procedures for combining them into meaningful units. Among speech, language and Communication, the greatest is communication; therefore if there is no communication, there is nothing but isolation and despair. The need to exchange messages, in some form, is critical to human.

Language is considered to be a system of communicating with other people using sounds, symbols and words in expressing meaning, idea or thought. Language may refer either to the specific human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication, or to a specific instance of a system of complex communication. Human language is unique, because it allows humans to produce an infinite set of utterances from a finite set of elements and because the symbols and grammatical rules of any particular language are largely arbitrary, the system can only be acquired through social interaction. Language as a tool of communication has been defined as a socially shared code or conventional system for representing concepts which are arbitrary symbols (Owens et al., 2007).

Other Aspects of Communication

Speech and language is only a portion of communication. Other aspect of communication may enhance or even eclipse the linguistic code. The aspects are paralinguistic, non linguistic, Meta linguistics. Para linguistic mechanism can change the meaning of a sentence by acting across individual sounds or word of a sentence .These mechanisms signal attitude or emotion and include intonation, stress, rate of delivery and pause or hesitation. Intonation patterns are changes in pitch, such as rising pitch at the end of a sentence used to signal a question. Pauses

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may be used to emphasize a portion of the message or to replace it. Even young children recognize that a short maternal pause after their request usually signals a negative replay.

Non-linguistic clues include gestures, body posture, facial expression, eye contact, head and body movement, and physical distance or proxemics. Each of these aspects of non-linguistic behavior can influence communication. For example, body posture and facial expression can convey the speaker's attitude towards a message or situation. Meta linguistic cues signal the status of communication based on our intuitions about the acceptability of utterances.

Two distinct taxonomies are used frequently for subcategorizing language. They are the traditional set which includes the five linguistic categories –phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics and the Bloom and Lahey model; 1978 which subcategorize language as form, content and use.

Pragmatics

The term *pragmatics* refer to the study of use of language in social situations .The words we use and the manner in which we speak depend on a great extent on our purpose and the constraints of the social situation .

Pragmatics involves three major communication skills:

Using language for different purposes, such as greeting (e.g., hello, goodbye), informing (e.g., I'm going to get a cookie) ,demanding (e.g., Give me a cookie) ,promising (e.g., I'm going to get you a cookie) ,requesting (e.g., I would like a cookie, please).

Following rules for conversations and storytelling, such as taking turns in conversation, introducing topics of conversation ,staying on topic ,rephrasing when misunderstood, how to use verbal and nonverbal signals ,how close to stand to someone when speaking ,how to use facial expressions and eye contact.

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Changing language according to the needs of a listener or situation, such as, talking differently to a baby than to an adult ,giving background information to an unfamiliar listener ,speaking differently in a classroom than on a playground.

Talking is a socio-psychological event and there are distinct rules that govern how we use language within different social contexts. Pragmatic rules govern sequential organization and coherence of conversation, repair of errors, role and speech acts. Organization and coherence of conversation includes turn taking; opening, maintaining, and closing a conversation; establishing and maintaining a topic; and making relevant contributions to the conversation. Repair includes giving and receiving feedback .Role skill includes establishing and maintaining a role, and switching linguistic code for each role. Finally speech act include coding of intentions relative to the communicative context.

To ignore pragmatics is to concentrate on language structure and to remove language from its communicative context. The motivation for language use and language acquisition is effective communication. The speaker chooses the form and content that will best fulfil her intentions based on her perception of the communicative situation. Thus language is not an abstract code but an interactive tool. A speaker's knowledge of the communication situation or context influences selection of the other aspects of language.

Juvenile Delinquents and Deficiency in Communication

The question of whether juvenile delinquents are deficient in communication skills is not new and, in fact has been studied for more than 30 years. Juvenile delinquent is an individual under the age of 18 years who manifest either antisocial or criminal behaviors. Juvenile delinquency is therefore a pattern of behavior of children, who come in conflict with the law. Studies have confirmed that juvenile delinquents have a higher incidence of speech, language, and hearing problems than non-institutionalized children and youth. Prevalence figures of communication problems in the delinquent population range from 24%-84 % (Cozad & Rousey, 1966; Falconer & Cochran, 1989). Moreover, recent studies suggest male (Davis, Sanger, &

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Morris-Friehe, 1991) and female delinquents (Sanger, Hux & Belau, 1997) qualify as potential candidates for language intervention.

Characteristics of Delinquents

Juvenile delinquent is different from his peers in a number of ways. That is to say that there are a number of traits which are significant predictors of delinquent activity.

Some of these traits appear to be fundamental personality factors: Hyperactivity, tendency to alcoholism, Psychosis, Low measured intelligence, Small stature and poor health, Male rather than female.

Some characteristic modes of social interaction: Bad temper, unpopular with peers, disruptive behavior in school, parents found him a difficult child, likely to be violent, poor work and bad results at school.

Some background traits: Living in a slum area, living in an area of high delinquency, social class, sociopathic fathers, family dynamics, poor surveillance, and irregular discipline, lack of affection, family interaction, family breakdown & poverty.

Factors Leading to Juvenile Delinquency

The main factors that play a role in making a child delinquent are as follows:

Biological factors: An individual's body build and features do influence his acceptability. For example, a club – footed boy may slip into delinquency to prove that he is good at something.

Sex: Sexes show little difference in type of offences during childhood, a period when boys and girls are treated in a similar fashion. Much of the differences in behavior between boys

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and girls are due to social expectations. The girl who feels she is discriminated against by her parents or treated brutally, consider delinquency as a way of reacting to this.

Family: Broken home causes delinquency. An insecure child, whose parent show that they neither expect nor hope for anything good to come out of him may seek satisfaction in the delinquent gang. Parents of delinquents are overly harsh and project their aggression into their children. Children in turn, may not dare to strike back but instead take out their own hostility on teachers and other adults. Poor communication between parents and children, leads to failure of children to learn appropriate social values. Children are affected undesirably when parents go to work, leaving the child in the streets. Parents of delinquents are often guilty of low morals as well. High incidence of sociopathic traits in the fathers of delinquent boys has been reported. These includes alcoholism, brutality, antisocial attitude, failure to provide for basic needs, frequent absences from home& other characteristics which made the father an unacceptable model for the boys. Mother's influence, seem to have more causal relation to girls' delinquency than boys. After a divorce, the mother's unhappiness adversely affects the child.

School: The school plays a part in evoking anti-social tendencies. Since lower class standards are typically represented as undesirable by middle class teachers, the lower class child feels that he is being devalued. His feelings of inferiority are further accentuated by slurs and taunts from his peers.

Neighborhood: Research has shown a high correlation between anti-social behavior and neighborhood at low economic levels. Poverty plays a part in producing the conditions which give rise to anti-social behavior.

Low intelligence: In 5% cases, low intelligence appears to be of etiological significance in delinquency. The delinquent is unable to appreciate the significance of his actions or to foresee the consequences.

Brain Pathology: In about 1%, brain pathology may result in lowered inhibitory controls and tendency towards aggressive and violent behavior.

Neurosis: In about 10 – 15 %, delinquent behavior appears to be directly associated with psychoneurotic disorders. Here the delinquent act takes the form of a compulsion such as peeping, stealing things which the individual does not need, or setting fire.

The Delinquent Gang: Juvenile delinquency is higher in the slum areas of large urban centers. Child is exposed to antisocial models and parents are not able to maintain a control over their children. In such environments teenage gangs flourish. Such gangs function as a haven for teenagers who have no clear sense of self – identity & feels rejected at home. Here they find social approval and status. The delinquent acts are ways of maintaining approve status in the gang.

Communication Problems in Juvenile Delinquents

Over the years, previous research has confirmed a high incidence of communication problems among male and female juvenile delinquent. Researchers have documented challenges in a broad range of communication skills including articulation, fluency, semantics, morphology and syntax. Standardized testing has shown that juvenile delinquent have a high incidence of communication problem.

Study by Moore Brown et al (2001) reveals that juvenile delinquents had poor standardized language test results, less complex language samples, problem with sequencing ideas and problems with pragmatic skills that included poor topic initiation and maintenance, inconsistent use of politeness techniques and variable application of rules governing conversational interactions. Researchers have estimated that at least 20% of adolescents residing in correctional facilities have language and communication problems (Sanger D. D., Creswell J. W., Dworik J., & Schultz L. 2000). This figure is more than three times higher than found within the general population. At least one out of five imprisoned girls has problems understanding and

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using language. Over half of the young offenders were identified as language impaired, in a cross-sectional study examining the oral language abilities and social skills of male juvenile delinquents (Snow P.C. and Powell M.B. 2008).

Davis AD, Sanger DD, Morris-Friehee (1991) compared the language skills of 24 delinquent and non delinquent adolescent males, ranging in age from 14.4-17.9 years and found a significant difference for language skills on the dependent measures between the two groups . Study done by Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C (2007) assessed the communication skills of 58 delinquents, aged 15-17 years on TOAL-3 .The results showed that 66%-90% juvenile offenders in this sample had below average language skills, with 46%-67% of these being in the poor or very poor group.

A study by Sanger D. D., Creswell J. W., Dworik J., & Schultz L. (2000) addressed communication behaviors of 78 juvenile delinquents ranging in age from 13.1-18.9 years over a 5 month period. Data collection consisted of participant observations, interviews and a review of documents. Participants were tested on the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-3. Findings indicated that as many as 22% of participants were potential candidates for language services.

Findings of the study by Dixie D. Sanger, Karen Hux, and Don Belau (1997) on the comparison of the language performances of female delinquents and non delinquents on a standardized test (The Test of Language Competence) suggest a significantly lower score in the standardized measures in delinquents.

Need for the Study

The speech and language measures assessed in most of the research work on juvenile delinquents tend to focus on the mastery of discrete skills and rarely assess communication performance in social contexts, which is an aspect of communication frequently assumed to be affected in them.

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Difficulty in socialization is an important characteristic feature of delinquency. Socialization enters an endless dimension through language. Assessment of pragmatic aspects of language provides a direct understanding on social skills of delinquents.

Hence, the purpose of the present study is to compare and contrast the pragmatic abilities of delinquent versus non-delinquent persons, and also to identify the pragmatic skill which is predominantly affected in delinquents.

Methods

Participants

The experimental group consisted of 9 male juvenile delinquents, between the age ranges of 12-13.11yrs, convicted of committing one or more misbehavior or felony offenses, with a minimum 6 months of detention at the observation home. And a control group of 9 male non-delinquents who were between the age range of 12-13.11yrs. All the participants chosen were devoid of any physical and sensory disabilities.

Procedure

The assessment tool used for assessing the pragmatic abilities of the participants was the Test of Pragmatic Language (TOPL) given by Phelps-Terasaki & T. Phelps-Gunn, 1992. The test comprised of items targeting the skills of requesting, informing and regulating. It was administered in a silent room, individually on each subject. General observations were also made on the pragmatic abilities of the subjects during group interactions.

The responses were rated as '0' for an inappropriate response and '1' for appropriate response. The raw score was tabulated accordingly. The participants were subjected to a 7 point

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rating scale in which the quotient >130 was rated as very superior & <70 was rated as very poor. Statistical analysis of the obtained data was done using the t-test.

Results

The results of the present study are tabulated below.

Sl No:	Delinquents			Non – delinquents		
	Age(in years)	Raw scores	Age equivalent	Age(in years)	Raw scores	Age equivalent
1	13.5	18	4.3	13.6	36	10.6
2	13.3	21	5	13.3	36	10.6
3	13.11	26	6.3	13	37	11.6
5	13.11	21	5	13.5	37	11.3
6	12.8	24	5.9	12.6	38	11.9
7	12.5	25	6	13.4	37	11.3
8	13	26	6.3	13.6	39	13.6
9	13.11	18	4.3	13.6	39	13.6

Table 1.1: Raw scores and the pragmatic age levels obtained for all the subjects in the delinquent & non-delinquent groups.

As seen in the above table 1.1, there is difference in the raw scores between the two groups, in which, the delinquent subjects have poorer scores as compared to the non-delinquent subjects.

Based on the raw scores obtained, the quotient was derived for each subject, and as shown in table 2.1, it was inferred that 100% of delinquent subjects were very poor in their

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pragmatic abilities, when compared to the non-delinquent age mates who were having 100% average pragmatic abilities.

RATING	Subject		Normal		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Very poor	9	100.0	0	.0	9	50.0
Average	0	0	9	100.0	9	50.0
Total	9	100.0	9	100.0	18	100.0

Table 2.1: Rating of pragmatic abilities

Table 3.1 as shown below, depicts the mean years of lagging of pragmatic language age in the delinquent and non-delinquent group.

CATEGORY	N	Mean years of lagging	SD	T	P
Subject	9	7.7	1.2	11.288	0.000*
Normal	9	1.3	1.0		

* $p < 0.005$

Table 3.1: Mean years of lagging and SD of the delinquent and non-delinquent group

Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) exists between delinquents and non-delinquent subjects in their mean years of pragmatic language delay with the non-delinquent children having a mean difference of 1.3 years and delinquent children having a mean difference of 7.7 years.

Of the three pragmatic skills (requesting, informing, regulating) assessed in the test, the task of requesting was most affected in the delinquent children.

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Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that the pragmatic language is very poor in the delinquents as compared to that of the non-delinquents. The results obtained is in line with the findings of Snow & Powell, 2004, who reported that male juvenile offenders perform significantly more poorly than non-offending peers and Sanger D.D, Davis A.D and Morris-Friehe M, 1991 who found significant differences for language skills between adolescent juvenile delinquent males and matched non-delinquent peers.

The poor performance could be attributed to their lack of awareness and limited monitoring of their communication behaviors (Sanger D.D., Hux K., and Ritzman M., 1999). Friction with parents or broken homes is conditions which are probably the most important factors in producing delinquency (Glueck, 1968). Majority of the participants in the experimental group were having poor family relationships. The deficits in their social skills may be attributed to the family background of the participants.

Of the three pragmatic skills assessed (requesting, informing & regulating), the task of requesting was greatly deficient in the juvenile delinquents. Problems in pragmatic skills including inconsistent use of politeness techniques and variable application of rules governing conversational interactions were reported to be seen in juvenile delinquents (Moore Brown et. al., 2001). Since politeness is a behavior which should accompany the act of requesting, inconsistent use of politeness techniques can have an effect on the pragmatic skill of requesting.

General observations made during the group interactions with the juvenile delinquents showed that their requesting was perceived as a demand rather than a request. They mainly used non-verbal means to gain attention of others. Outburst of emotions whether happiness, sadness or anger was noticed.

Conclusion

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The present study highlights the need for the assessment of the pragmatic abilities in delinquent individuals, thereby indicating the importance to establish effective intervention programs for such persons.

The findings have particular implications in the areas of investigative interviewing of juvenile offenders and early intervention for high-risk boys. Intervention should be aimed at creating awareness among such children on appropriate pragmatic abilities and teaching them to incorporate these skills into their daily social situations.

The attempts to rehabilitate and social reintegration of a child shall begin during the stay of child in a children's home or special home and the rehabilitation and social reintegration of children shall be carried out alternatively by adoption, foster care, sponsorship & sending the child to an after care organization. In this way, by laying down the provisions like the above, we can provide due justice to the juveniles through special legal means with an eye to provide for the specialized approach towards the prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency in its full range in keeping with the developmental needs of the child found in any situation of social maladjustment. It is not a simple task. An all-round goodness and change of attitude on the part of all the parties involved in these attempts is well needed. Any insincerity and dishonesty on the part of anyone may derail the total process of helping the delinquents in returning to the mainstream and live their life properly as a responsible and productive member of the society.

Delinquent behavior is a deep-rooted learned reaction; therefore, careful attempts should be made for providing psychological treatment and handling of the child's behavioral actions. Education is by all means a desirable way for helping the delinquents. Therefore, with the help of the provision of a special school, these children should be helped in achieving all that which has been denied to them in the past on account of their delinquent behavior. As far as possible, the delinquents should be helped to acquire such vocational and occupational efficiency that may help them to acquire self-sufficiency in terms of getting employment and engage in their own entrepreneurship. They should also be helped in providing opportunity for the acquisition of

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proper social and leisure skills with an eye to provide a means of catharsis during their stay in special homes or correction centers and a way of living their life afterwards properly in their community settings. An adequate follow-up programme should essentially be followed for the rehabilitation of the juvenile offenders after their correction and treatment in the special homes.

Every one of us has in fact a moral duty, a real humanitarian obligation to be performed with our juveniles for helping them to come out from the turmoil they are facing in their life.

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