

## **A General Semantics Approach to Reducing Student Alienation**

Dr. Martin H. Levinson

This presentation will examine a study that showed students manifesting signs of alienation (a well-recognized drug abuse risk factor) could be helped to reduce those symptoms through a general semantics approach. It is based on research conducted for a Ph.D. dissertation titled “The Effects of General Semantics Instruction on Three Dimensions of Alienation Among Eighth and Ninth Grade Problem Students.” The results of the study demonstrated that general semantics can empower students to be more in control of their lives and to more closely identify with the goals of learning. Further details of the research can be found in chapter eight in Martin H. Levinson, *The Drug Problem: A New View Using the General Semantics Approach* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

### **Research Description**

In common parlance the term “alienation” is used to describe the condition of being estranged or detached from one’s self, others, or society in general. But alienation as a research concept is more complex since it can be approached from a variety of different disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, and social psychology) and can take on a variety of different meanings - anomie, loss of self, despair, apathy, loneliness, rootlessness, powerlessness, isolation, pessimism, etc.

The study under review considered alienation from a socio-psychological perspective using a research model developed by Seeman that contains six researchable dimensions of alienation. Three of those dimensions, powerlessness (a state characterized by feelings of helplessness about not being able to influence situations), self-estrangement (a state characterized by feelings of detachment toward situations), and cultural estrangement (a state characterized by rebelliousness toward the goals and priorities of the institutions in which one must live, work, or study) were selected as variables for analysis and included in the three hypotheses of the experiment — that general semantics would reduce powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement.

General semantics, a re-educational discipline that combines an awareness of the role language plays in fostering communication and that emphasizes the use of the scientific method to solve everyday problems, was chosen to reduce the three aspects of student alienation. (Past educational studies indicated general semantics increases critical thinking skills, enhances creativity, improves personality adjustment, and decreases prejudice).

Seventy eighth and ninth grade students participated in the alienation study and were randomly assigned, within grade to experimental and control groups. This resulted in the formation of ten groups — three ninth grade and two eighth grade experimental groups and three ninth grade and two eighth grade control groups — with seven students in each group.

The students in the experimental group received an alienation pretest, two introductory group development sessions, sixteen general semantics lessons, and an alienation posttest over a nineteen week span. The same format was employed with the control group students except

instead of general semantics lessons they received traditional guidance oriented lessons. All the groups met once a week for forty-five minutes (a standard school period).

To counter possible expectancy effects (a research science phenomenon that can occur when investigators unintentionally alter their behavior in ways that bias their subjects in favor of the research hypotheses), the counselor leading the groups arranged for a colleague to be with him during group sessions. The feedback received from this colleague after each group meeting helped to ensure that all the lessons were being presented to the students in fair and impartial way. To determine baseline levels of student alienation the Pupil Attitude Questionnaire (PAQ), a research instrument containing sub tests that measure Seeman's dimensions of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement was administered to each of the students at the beginning of the experiment. The PAQ pretest results indicated that the experimental and control group students were highly alienated in equivalent degrees.

At the conclusion of the experiment, the students were examined with a PAQ posttest, and pretest and posttest means were computed on the three experimental variables for each of the groups. Then pretest means were subtracted from posttest means within, and a t-test was computed between the gain scores of the experimental and control groups. (All tests of significance were conducted at the .05 level. Experimental mortality was not a factor since all the students who took the pretest also took the posttest.)

The tests showed exceptionally strong support for all three hypotheses, beyond the .001 level. This high level of support held for both eighth and ninth grade groups.

## **Examining the Results**

To reduce student alienation, the study and practice of general semantics would have to empower the students in the experimental groups to be more in control of their lives and to more closely identify with the goals of learning. This was successfully accomplished using three basic approaches:

1. students were taught general semantics formulations and techniques for making effective evaluations and decisions;
2. students were instructed in general semantics problem solving methods; and
3. students were provided with a general semantics philosophy for thinking and for more mature behavior.

The following is a brief synopsis of some of the formulations and exercises that were taught to these students underlying these approaches.

### **Approach #1**

#### **General Semantics Formulations and Techniques for More Effective Evaluations and Decisions**

- a. The value of a "delayed reaction:" To make effective evaluations and and decisions, general semantics supports the use of "delayed reactions." This technique, which involves the human ability to consciously engage one's higher brain functions and delay

reacting in order to appropriately evaluate a situation before one acts, tends to produce much better results than reacting quickly or impulsively in most situations,

- b. Distinguishing facts from inferences to avoid jumping to wrong conclusions: To make accurate assessments of situations, and to avoid jumping to wrong conclusions about them, it is important to know how to distinguish facts from inferences.
- c. The dangers of negative self-inferences: The question is not whether or not we make inferences; the question is whether or not we are aware of the inferences we make.
- d. The importance of subjectivity in making evaluations: WIGO (what is going on) is never WIS (what I say) and WIS (what I say) is never WIGO (what is going on).

## **Approach #2**

### General Semantics and Effective Problem Solving

- a. The scientific method: To help students solve everyday problems more effectively, general semantics advocates using the scientific method (observe, test, evaluate). This approach, which has produced many important and useful scientific discoveries, views problems as challenges that call for active responses.
- b. General semantics coping statements: A problem-solving approach employed by the students involved an exercise in which youngsters wrote down on a piece of paper a description of a problem they were having, a general semantics formulation that was relevant to the problem, and a coping statement based on the formulation.

## **Approach #3**

### Achieving Greater Maturity through General Semantics

Some general semantics concepts relating to this topic include the following:

- a. The word is not the thing, the map is not the territory: Because someone says you are stupid does not make you stupid.
- b. Beware the IFD syndrome: Going from Idealization to Frustration to Demoralization can result in “burnout”--putting in too much effort, not getting hoped for results, and feeling pretty lousy.
- c. “Dating” things and events helps to remind us that changes occur over time: Joe (1992) is not Joe (2002); the drug problem (1970) is not the drug problem (2000).
- d. “Indexing” items aids in their analysis: All members of a group are not the same (student 1 is different than student 2 is different than student 3, etc.).
- e. Adding a silent etc. to thoughts and statements increases an awareness that there is always more that can be said about something.

## **The Presentation**

The aforementioned research findings will be discussed and interactive audience demonstrations will be conducted about how to employ general semantics formulations and exercises to reduce student alienation. The demonstrations will include exercises involving (a) the use of general semantics role plays; with audience members playing the role of alienated students, (b) the use of general semantics coping statements to promote calm, clear thinking; (c) the use of general semantics strategies to avoid making negative self-inferences that can lead to “self-fulfilling” and “other-fulfilling” prophecies;” and (d) the use of the “delayed reaction” technique to help master impulsively reacting to words. Information will be provided about where to obtain age-appropriate general semantics counseling and teaching materials and copies of the article “A General Semantics Approach to Reducing Student Alienation” will be distributed to all workshop attendees.