Hart and Risley 20 Years Later: Perspectives and Progress

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Betty Hart’s clip board..........................
The data were collected in the 1980’s – a different time for sure.

- The technology was primitive! But the personal computer arrived in the middle of the decade.
- The internet was but a dream
- Genes were still thought of as almost in-malleable by many
- Developmental neuroscience was young but promising
- Behaviorism and Psychoanalytic approaches still represented a big divide between many behavioral scientists.
- Meanwhile, the residue effects of the failed War on Poverty still haunted many communities
Within this context - it’s an **understatement** to say that Hart & Risley study was groundbreaking – **nothing like it had ever been done**! But like all research it wasn’t perfect.

- It was a representative sample – except of course it didn’t include the least stable, most vulnerable families (few studies ever pull this off)

- Most observations were taken during the late afternoon – which turns out to generally be the richest period of parent-child interaction. So extrapolating the data likely overestimated the amount of parent-child interaction that occurred in a day.

- The data collection was potentially susceptible to the Hawthorne effect.

- Many of us thought the various costs and challenges of conducting the study made it an unlikely candidate for direct replication.
Nevertheless....what Hart & Risley discovered has been affirmed in various ways by a variety of studies over the past 20 years.
One can argue about the absolute size of the word gap they reported, but it’s clear that “frequency does matter”!!!

Two other fundamental findings are also indisputable.
If a parent only talks a little to their child, their initiations to the child are likely to be primarily directives.

If a parent talks a lot, most of the “extra talk” will be conversation, and reading.
And perhaps more importantly…………

• The style of parenting associated with low rates of parent-child interaction tends to be dominated by a potentially toxic ratio of prohibitions to encouragements.

• For mothers who talked the least to their children, Hart and Risley report a ratio of approximately 1 affirmative for every 2 prohibitions.

• For mothers who talked most to their children, the ratio was 6 affirmatives to every 1 prohibition.

• These ratios reflect stunningly different environments.
So it’s not about “just talking more”

• Conversational turn-taking is the hallmark of a responsive style of parenting. One in which the parent follows the young child’s attentional lead and engages in turn-taking interactions that build on the child’s interests and steadily expands their vocabulary.

• These conversations often occur around books and stories.

• The effects are not “just on language”…..this interaction style cumulatively impacts cognitive, social, and emotional development too.
This highly responsive style of parenting is not difficult to learn. But the key is to establish it early in a child’s development as a normal and routine way of interacting every day.
The road ahead
LENA and The Cloud

• LENA has recently been coupled to a “Cloud based data collection system” that allows the relatively quick provision of quantitative feedback to early interventionists and program supervisors overseeing community based programs

• This innovation is being tested under “real world conditions”.

• This is a GAME CHANGER!
Parent based interventions generally follow the “train and hope/pray/wish model” due to **3 classic problems**

- **Problem 1**: You can’t directly measure the fidelity of the treatment.
- **Problem 2**: You can’t readily measure treatment effectiveness.
- **Problem 3**: Interventionists can’t get critical information about Problems 1 and/or 2 in time for them to do anything about it.
Three technologies that “BRING DATA”

1. Measure fidelity of treatment

2. Measure effectiveness

3. Feed back data to those that can make a difference
Some predictions..............

• The technology will keep evolving – it will get better and better.
• Further innovations will come from all sorts of unexpected places.
• The science will both lead and follow.
• At the community/program level, there will be some implementation failures which, if wisely studied, will improve implementation success down the line.
ADDITIONAL FOOD FOR THOUGHT

• Rapid scientific advances often occur following major breakthroughs in measurement (just ask Galileo!!)

• LENA represents one such breakthrough for the measurement of real world learning environments

• In a globalized world, societies (cities, states, countries) already compete in part based on the depth and breadth of their citizens intellectual skills – optimizing early development for our youngest citizens is an investment in our collective future.
So will all this ultimately matter in the lives of millions of unborn children across the world?
Betty Hart, Todd Risley, & Terry Paul were all pragmatic people.

But they were all dreamers too. They wanted to make a meaningful difference in children’s lives.

Pragmatic dreamers like them will determine just how much of a meaningful difference this will make in the long run.
“No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars or sailed to an uncharted land or opened a new heaven to the human spirit.”
Helen Keller