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# THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF A CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION<sup>1</sup>

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—EDITOR.

Every social grouping develops patterns of interrelationships that have significance for the members of those groupings. These patterns are sometimes called the social structure and such a structure exists in every assemblage of persons which is more than temporary.

The social structure of an institution which handles more than one hundred boys in a special capacity has a very definite effect on the population of that institution. On occasion this effect may be negative. In fact, there are many important ways in which this social structure may clearly create problems which can be detected through an analysis of the culture patterns that develop among the boys who reside in such institutions as Reformatories, State Industrial Schools, and Orphanages. This paper attempts to analyze this effect of the social structure in a boy's Industrial School which houses two hundred boys or more.

Groupings in general vary according to many factors and the effects of these groupings are subject to scrutiny by trained personnel as well as by lay persons. For example, the impact of the family grouping with its emphasis on intense interaction between the parent figures through the male and female role and mother-father roles and their children is very different from that pattern in a community grouping where the roles are more diversified and less personal and intense. The child in the family structure is affected by the intensity and emotional attachments in the interaction. His learning is very different from the learning that occurs in a broader and more impersonal social structure such as a public school system. The social

structure of the community is broad and general for the most part and the roles are less distinct. The learning or socialization that occurs in community living is again different from that which exists in the family or the school. The interplay between individuals has a vast range.<sup>2</sup>

The social structure of an institution which is geared toward re-education of delinquent boys is indeed of a vast range. The major aspects of the structure are centered around an authoritarian system of adult personnel playing the role of the supervisor and the educator of the child. The boy is expected to accept a pattern of submission to the dominance of the adult. He is expected to defer to the demands and decisions and directives of the adult figures. These adults are different from parents because the child is not expected to identify himself emotionally with them as he would with his mother or father. Identification and emotional attachment do not exist for him in this adult-leader situation. His response in learning and development is different from the family life that he has had prior to his commitment to the institution. His learning is based on his ability to conform to the requirements of the personnel in charge. There is very little in the way of idealization and emulation between the authoritarian personnel and the child in the school. The many aspects of contact are different and almost indescribable in the family setting, whereas in the institution, the contact tends to be linear and categoric with little variation in quality.

Another major difference is the existence of a

<sup>2</sup> The differential stake in conformity in the individuals within a given community can account for a varying tendency to become committed to an anti-social way of life. See, *Social Disorganization and Stake in Conformity: Complementary Factors in the Predatory Behavior of Hoodlums*, by Jackson Tolly, this JOURNAL, 48, 12-17. (May-June, 1957.)

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment is made to the Council on Research and Creative Work at the University of Colorado for financial assistance in the completion of this research.

homogeneity in terms of sex. The student population is composed of boys entirely in a special age grouping. The adult personnel is composed of both men and women. The impact of the male population is very different from that of the social structure of the community in which the boy lived prior to his commitment. The very definite problems with sexual matters and identification of this age group are naturally different from those of the broader culture outside. The institutional structure has a profound impact in that at best it is but a substitute, albeit an inadequate substitute of necessity.

#### CULTURE PATTERNS REVEAL INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS<sup>3</sup>

Many problems develop in institutional living, some of which are easily detected through the culture patterns that spring up among the boys. A culture pattern is a way of doing something which is distinct and can be observed as a real and persistent expression over a period of time. The culture patterns that seem to indicate the most important problems are usually those dealing with sexual identifications and anxieties, mother-feminine relationships, father-masculine compulsiveness expressions, big-shotism, personal status discontent, cynicism of unfulfilled dreams, racial-ethnic conflicts, and the aggressiveness and hostility arrangements among the boys. Each of these expressions will be analyzed later.

One thing stands out clearly in the relations of the existing culture patterns. This problem of relationships is called polarity. Issues tend to become polarized in extremes very easily in the institutional structure. The barriers between the children and the adults are frequently very rigid and the social distance is acute. Polarity often occurs between ethnic or racial groups with an intense amount of negative feelings developing. There are strong polarities in regard to sexual manifestations. The boys with problems over sexual identification often find themselves alienated from the others through various culture patterns that develop.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive development of the subject of culture patterns, institutional patterns and problems viewed from various approaches, see the following: *DELINQUENT BOYS* by ALBERT COHEN, The Free Press, 1955; *TEENAGE GANGS*, by KRAMER AND KARR, Henry Holt, 1953, with special reference to pages 208-240; *THE JUVENILE OFFENDER: Perspective and Readings* by CLYDE VEDDER, Doubleday, 1954; *MY SIX CONVICTS* by DONALD WILSON, Rinehart and Co., 1948.

Polarity means the absence of good communication lines for the most part. Acceptance of another individual is often impeded by the effect of rigidity of ideas and interaction. Once a person becomes categorized, he often finds that his entire actions are judged in terms of the limited perception of his category that has developed. Polarization often means a reaction by the institutional personnel that becomes entrenched against a particular child or group of children. The possibility of learning or modification is endangered.

In order to break down the barrier in communication that develops through the polarization of issues, a member of the adult personnel must have extraordinary skills and a vast perspective about the total institution. It is difficult for the personnel, for example, to help a child work through a feeling of being considered a bully. The label or concept circulates throughout the institution and thus persons react to the child as if he were expressing his aggressiveness and dominance in all phases of his group living. To effect a change in this situation, the adult person must understand the nature of the interaction of the child with his peers, the feelings he has toward adult-child relationships, his own self-concept, and many other factors. Frequently, institutions reinforce bad self-concepts and behavior patterns by making them seem synonymous with the child in every action he portrays.

The boys outside correctional institutions are not confronted with the same kinds of problems that boys within the gates face. The structure of the institution has many important functions in this regard. For example, a boy in school may have an acute disagreement with a boy next to him and have an impending fight scheduled later in the day. This may become lost in the larger community when the boys leave the schools and have the freedom to go with those whom they choose and where they choose. The freedom of movement is very different for a boy in the larger community structure from what it is for the boy in the institution. If conflicts develop along very personal lines in which there is a desire to engage in fighting, the boys are kept in close association and the tight social structure produces intensity of response. The boys do not have the freedom to get out of the impact of the situation they create when there is a flare-up of hostility. Some courses of action seem to demand immediate attention with little ability to alter the situation. Relationships have a tendency to move under greater stress and tension in a

closed structure such as an institution than they do in the broader social systems of the public schools and the neighborhoods.

The behavior problems of the institutional child permeate the closer situational living more intricately than they possibly would in the public school. The boys are forced to live with the problems in all phases of their lives in closed institutions.

The culture patterns of the children in the correctional institutions often are diagnostic of the problems that are created and manifested among the boys.<sup>4</sup> When there is an ability to gain insight from the culture patterns as to the important issues and problems to be dealt with in the institution, the staff that is trained to handle such problems is at a great advantage. Some of these culture patterns are now discussed at length.

#### "BIG SHOTISM" AS A CULTURE PATTERN

In almost all groupings, power-status hierarchies develop. There is no exception in an Industrial School. The function of the "big-shot" is deeply significant to the entire social structure of the institution. The person who achieves a position of power and dominance over the other boys is the big-shot. There seem to be two distinct types of power leaders. The one is the boy who achieves his position through brute force. He is able physically to best anyone who counters him. He usually has a cluster of lieutenants who administer his feelings and force throughout the groupings that exist. He solicits favors from others and takes things from them without having to worry about the effects of being detected by the administration. The other boys are afraid to resist in any way. The power arrangement here is very important because a shift in power means a great deal to the entire functioning of the population of the school. There is an intense interplay between the minority groups and the position of the big-shot. Often the size and strength of the minority ethnic group determine which person will be the big-shot.

A very significant thing develops in many institutions. There tend to be very high rates of delinquency among various ethnic groups which seem to have low status positions in the dominant

culture. In the southern part of the United States, there are high rates of crime and delinquency among Negroes. There are also high rates in large urban areas. The population of Negroes in some state institutions is frequently very high. In the southwestern and western states, the rates of delinquency are very high among the Spanish-American and Mexican-American children. In some state institutions in these areas, the population of the institution is the reverse of the regular population because the Spanish-Americans are the minority group in these states as a rule. With the tables turned, there are often needs to retaliate against the members of the institutions who are non-Spanish. The reaction is often hostile and aggressive.

Shifts in institutional population often influence patterns of interaction. For instance, if the big-shots and power leaders in a company assignment follow an ethnic line and they are removed either through parole or isolation due to misconduct, the status hierarchy is changed and the new groups begin to vie for power and control. Vengeance and seeking of retribution often provoke a battle between the groups. The symbols and ways of doing things indicate the particular problems that are responses to the problems of ethnic or racial conflicts. When a person in charge is aware of the expressions of prejudice and racial hatred and their effects in the status hierarchy and the total institution, he has an enormously useful insight that he can implement professionally for the purpose of controlling situations.

The second type of leader that often develops in the institution is the so-called charismatic leader. This person holds the groups in his power through their emotional attachment to him. He does not have to apply a strong-arm method of control. He still dictates the events and can have control of the persons with whom he deals and he tends to be the real decision-maker among the boys, but his control is through their identification with his appeal as a strong person. His control is often very tenuous due to the impact of the institutional structure because he finds himself constantly being judged by both the boys and the administrators. Any wrong move that would deflect his character means a problem for him in terms of his mastery of the others around him. There are fewer charismatic leaders than big-shots in institutions for correction.

<sup>4</sup>For a study of the dynamic relationship between the informal social structure of a prison community and the formal social structure, see: *Group Dynamics in the Prison Community* by MORRIS G. CALDWELL, this JOURNAL, 46, 648-657 (Jan-Feb. 1956)

SEXUAL IDENTIFICATION AS A CULTURE PATTERN<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most important cluster of culture patterns exist in the area of sexual identification and dilemma. There are many expressions of these problems in the institutional structure. The boys who come to Industrial schools are usually in the prepuberty or puberty stage and have a sufficient amount of anxiety about their new sexual role. There are times when they wish to experiment with the new surges in their bodies and the new emotional states that exist for them. The contagion of a large group of boys frequently arouses exaggerated responses. The past training and socialization of the boys means a good deal also in the manner in which the new energies and interests are expressed. There are several striking culture patterns that develop and an analysis of them is very much needed.

In recent studies and observations, there appears to be a large number of children who come to the correctional institutions who were living with their mothers only. Many of the boys have been deserted by their fathers at a very early age and thus the boys have grown up with their mothers. In other cases there are family relationships which indicate that the boys have had a very poor relationship with their fathers due to some form of personal disorganization that the fathers have experienced, such as alcoholism, imprisonment, mental illness, physical incompetence and long records of unemployment and others. Thus the end result is that the fathers have not been good role models for the boys and they have thus failed to assist their children in formulating male role requirements in the culture and internalizing the social skills to play the male role adequately.

Thus a boy may come to the school with a good deal of anxiety about his role position and the needed skills to handle himself properly or, in some cases, he may come with the need to understand what the expectations of the culture are for him as a young man and an eventual male adult. Coupled with this failure to experience this very essential identification and idealization with the adult male figure in the form of the father is the fact that most of these boys have been forced to learn almost exclusively from female figures. Many have mothers who are dominant in their attachment to

the child. The over-identification with the feminine figure and the feeling that the mother is the only one who can give warmth and support combine to produce a dependency on the female figure. The anxieties here are very keen. The child also experiences the pressures in his socialization of the compulsion to express his masculinity when he reaches this pre-adolescent and adolescent age. The demands are clear in the culture that he should play the male role and not do anything that would subject him to being called a sissy or too much like a girl. With his identification with the mother and the lack of internalization of male role requirements, he often experiences a good deal of anxiety. Then, his age also indicates that he is developing biologically with a surge of new sexual energy. The dilemma is often very great. If he is left with his peer group as the instructor, he often feels a need to overreact and prove how very tough and masculine he really is and thus his behavior becomes anti-social because he frequently confuses masculinity with being tough and bad and hard. Much delinquency is precisely an expression of this very personal masculine protest.

The culture patterns that develop in the school indicate how very important above problems are to the boy and how the institutional structure nurtures the growth of such problems and channels the expressions. One of these problems is noticed in what the boys express as "calling down someone's mother." The boy will find out the name of the mother or the sister of another boy and will then proceed to call that boy by his mother's first name. He will also tell the boy that he has "had the boy's mother or that he is going to have her" when he gets out. He calls the boy's mother a prostitute and talks about her sexuality. The boy who is being "called down" becomes angry and retaliates in some manner. There are times when the "calling down of the mother" becomes very intense and tempers flare. The need of a boy to express hostility, sexuality, and defamation in this culture pattern is understandable in the light of the above analysis. The anxiety over a need for sexual release is one facet. The hostility toward the female figure and mother figure because of the over-identification and the sanctions against such dependency is another facet. The internalized anger and the need to hurt and antagonize is still another.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For a sociologist's approach to the subject of Sexual Identification and sex rules, see *FAMILY, SOCIALIZATION AND INTEGRATION PROCESSES*, by PARSONS AND BALES, The Free Press, 1955, pages 91 and following.

<sup>6</sup> *THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD* by REDL AND WINEMAN, The Free Press, 1957, includes two books by these

If a deeper psycho-analytical approach were used, the problem could be explained in terms of an unresolved oedipal stage. The tension that exists in institutional group living is increased by the existence of this particular culture pattern and the dynamics that exist in the boys which find expression through the form of sexuality and hostility.

#### POLARITY AS A VARIATION OF SEXUAL IDENTIFICATION

Another variation of the problem of sexuality and dilemma can be noted in a polarity that springs up among the boys. When a boy indicates that he is probably possessed with too many feminine traits and has failed to demonstrate his ultra masculine compulsiveness, he finds himself in a conflict situation. The boys who fall in the category of being feminine, weak, and cowards are called by various names. They may be called "fruits" or "crackouts" or "chickens". They are resented and attacked by the other boys who see themselves as the tough and strong boys. There is a definite polarity that exists between these groups. Social relationships follow these lines in great part. There is also a vague feeling that the matter of legality and conformity to the institution's rules are associated with being the "crackout" or the "fruit".

The failure to have had a significant identification and emotional attachment with the father in early childhood produces many problems for these boys who come to Industrial schools. There is resentment and belligerence toward the male figure because of the desertion and alienation that has existed between the child and his father. The above discussion indicates the effects of the over-identification with the female figure and the reaction formations that develop. There are also culture patterns that exist which clearly indicate the further problems that the boys have with their male identification anxieties. Again the aspect of polarity is very important. The males with whom the boys would identify are the adult personnel in the institution. These might be teachers, the shop attendants, the administrators, the clinical and social service personnel and others. If a boy

identifies with one of the male personnel, the other boys begin to tell him that this man "is your daddy." Such a statement is said with resentment and anger, and to be told that one of the employees is "your daddy" is a negative and destructive thing. Further dynamics of the situation are very involved. In the first place the boy may feel that the male figures have been desertive and often objectionable people in his past life. There is some resentment. A boy feels he should not trust a man because of the past experiences of desertion and hatred from the father. Again, if he does identify with the male, he is aligning himself with the adult authoritarian structure of the institution and such a process holds much negative sanction among the boys. Then the sexuality angle develops because if a boy tells another boy that a particular male figure in the institution is "your daddy," the ultimate meaning is that this man must be having sexual relations with the mother of that boy. The emotional dynamite here is vast. The tension is again increased when such a culture pattern has an important place in the lives of these children.

A further aspect of the problem of polarity in the institutional social structure appears. There is reason to believe that in some institutions some boys are actually strengthened in their delinquent adjustments. The dynamics involved here are very intense and subtle. Many boys come to a correctional institution with some very deep personal anger and hostility toward their worlds and significant people in them. They have often been brutalized to the point where they manifest a hardened exterior with a very deeply embedded cynicism and anger toward the parent figures and the broader social systems. They often react against the dominant value structure and develop the feeling that anything that is valuable and acceptable for the dominant culture is wrong for them and vice versa. The boy becomes polarized in regard to the feeling that he cannot become a significant figure in the culture around him and thus he develops a feeling of alienation from the culture. If he has been brutalized through vindictive and cruel punishment or observation of very distraught parent figures, he frequently develops strong feelings of cynicism and hostility and further alienates himself from the world around him. He frequently begins to strike out aggressively against legalized norms and the people whose function it is to administer control in the culture. He begins to feel that he cannot possibly accept legitimate

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authors: CHILDREN WHO HATE and CONTROLS FROM WITHIN, Chapter 3 in the former, and Chapters 1 and 2, pages 281-393 in the latter. These passages point up the significance of programs and institutions in the lives of delinquents as well as the development of aggressions and antagonisms.

standards because a compromise would mean weakness or laying himself open to be hurt further in his relations with people who he feels are so very different from him. If an institution has within it a structure of punishment and discipline that is largely corporal and vindictive and prolonged punishment, the chances are that the boy who functions with alienated feelings and deep hostility will be further reinforced in these feelings and become a dangerous or potentially explosive individual. Some institutions insure the world of having murderers and destructive criminals and delinquents through their treatment program if it is one that deals with conflicts through abuse and terror and irrational retribution. The real movement of the individual in this situation seems to be further alienation from the dominant culture. The alienation is colored with hostility and rigorous cynicism. The world is cruel and the only way to cope with it is by being more cruel and strong. This description is frequently too real in too many cases of children who become brutalized and express their dismay and anger through the most atrocious behavior patterns.

#### CULTURE PATTERNS WHICH EMPHASIZE WEAK AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE CHILD

Another culture pattern that exists in the institutional structure refers to the problem of self-concept and the fact that people do act in terms of the way they deeply feel about themselves. When a boy comes to the school, he is accepted into the group of boys either with ease or with varying amounts of difficulty. He is scrutinized by the boys and then is evaluated by them in terms of his abilities and toughness and the factors of confidence among the boys and the polarity with the administrative staff. He is also viewed as an individual. Unfortunately, the boys tend to select the physically maladjusted or psychologically inhibiting aspects of the other children and then to use them further to strengthen any negative feelings that the boy might have about himself. If he has a number of pimples on his face, he is referred to as "pimples." If he has a limp in his walk, he is referred to as the "crip" or "popo." If he has scars on his face or body, he is called "scars." If he is overweight, he is called "blimp." If he is underweight, he is called "boney." There are many of these negative nick-

names that are given to the boys. Very rarely is there a positive one. There seem to be strong indications that the boys are attempting to deride the fellow students, apparently in the belief that it heightens their own status to do so.

Most of the boys who are sent to Industrial schools have fairly negative self-concepts. They see themselves as being very worthless and bad individuals. The institutional structure often creates a psychological situation which reinforces these negative self-concepts. The manner in which a person feels about himself is very meaningful in terms of his behavior in specific situations.

Most of the boys who come to correctional institutions are boys who are not able to accept the responsibility of their behavior. They do not have the internalized controls that are necessary for them to realize and accept the consequences of their behavior. Many are consistently excusing themselves and trying to find means of escape from any personal responsibility. As a result, persons who are working with them in various problem areas must always be consistent and fair in their dealings. Any mistake they might make is a means of escape from responsibility for the boy. If he is accused of stealing a pen from a desk drawer and he really took some paper clips, he immediately feels that he was "framed" because he did not take the pen at all. He feels that he is being unjustly accused because he did not take the pen. He cannot generalize to the larger act of theft and see his responsibility for that behavior. There are many of these experiences in the everyday lives of these children which point out their inability to accept responsibility for their behavior and their intense means of finding ways which will eliminate their having to accept any responsibility.

A correctional institution is a very complicated place with many events occurring every day. Every interpersonal relation that develops is important in the total structure of social interaction. The culture patterns that exist are often very good indicators of the individual and group problems that exist. These culture patterns need to be thoroughly understood and dealt with by the staff that is trained to rehabilitate the children. A diagnosis can be developed from the effects of the patterns that develop in the institution and this diagnosis can be effective in therapy.