

The Informal System

An Agent of Change in Juvenile Rehabilitation

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Juvenile correctional programs must bridge the gap between an institution's official system and the delinquent subculture or anti-official system. This paper describes how one program developed techniques to utilize the natural boy leadership of the informal anti-official system and certain elements of the boy culture as a stratagem for enhancing the resocialization process of delinquents in a youth rehabilitation camp setting. It is suggested that, if treatment is to become more effective, juvenile correctional personnel must utilize the informal system within their institutions as an agent of change.

THE RECENT LITERATURE stresses the importance of recognizing the peer culture within the juvenile correctional institution as a force which must be exploited if delinquents are to modify their values and behavior patterns. The impact of the counseling interview can be dissipated quickly by peer pressure on the youngster directed at his need to get along with other adolescents.

"Since the delinquent subculture supports the values of the peer group, the problem of the correctional institution is to structure the situation so that the antisocial values of the primary group are replaced by more positive ones."¹ Therefore, juvenile

correctional institutions cannot ignore the informal structure or override it without seriously jeopardizing the achievement of treatment goals. Two youth rehabilitation camps in Michigan employ three techniques that make conscious use of this delinquent subculture or informal system as an agent of change.

Michigan's two youth rehabilitation camps, each a unit of fifty beds, are a part of the State Boys Training School. The camps are located on state forest land in the northern part of the lower peninsula. Each camp has a staff of fifteen: two counselors, one teacher, three cooks, a maintenance man, six supervisors, a secretary, and the camp supervisor.

The purpose of the camps is to provide a rehabilitative experience in an outdoor setting. The program con-

¹ M. Zald, "The Correctional Institution for Juvenile Offenders: An Analysis of Organizational 'Character,'" *Social Problems*, Summer 1960, pp. 57-67.

sists of prevocational work experience (conservation projects), basic education, individual and group counseling, religious opportunities, and a diversified outdoor recreation program.

The primary mission of the camps is to help the boys modify past patterns of antisocial behavior by increasing their self-awareness, raising self-esteem, and encouraging them to establish realistic personal goals. The camp program becomes the target unit for those adjudicated delinquent boys who are not goal directed, are academically retarded, and resist a more formal educational experience. The camp setting induces total staff involvement with boys and provides close staff-boy relationships. It also lends itself to small-group activities for work crews, school classes, camp-trips, and other pursuits.

Use of Informal System

When the camp program was first launched, staff recognized the need to bridge the gap between the camp formal system and the boy culture or informal system. The camp setting—for that matter, any institutional setting—is an artificial community to which the delinquent youth must adapt. It is natural to expect that the youngster is going to adapt to this environment in the same way he adapted to his natural home and community.

The adaptive techniques used by the delinquent often challenge the values upheld by administration and staff. To counter the maladaptive behavior it becomes imperative, therefore, that the peer group itself provide the delinquent with positive techniques for adaptation. The boys

are the "significant others"² necessary to enhance the accomplishment of treatment objectives. The staff have used three techniques in an effort to close the gap between the formal-structure value system and the informal system, and thereby enable the two systems to overlap to some degree. The three techniques are (1) the camp council, (2) the big brother program, and (3) the community meetings.

CAMP COUNCIL

The camp council is composed of six boys nominated and elected by the total boy population. The council provides an official, direct, and uninhibited channel of communication from boys to administration. The boys elected to this group often represent the leadership of the informal system; through the camp council, by which this structure is legitimized, they become a part of the formal system or official structure. In turn, their position of influence in the informal system is modified. For example, the informal system may be stressing a particular anti-staff attitude. By opening communication between the boy leaders and camp administrator, the council can examine the rationale for the boys' attitude, which can then be analyzed, challenged, discussed, and modified. In turn, the rationale behind the staff's position can be challenged, discussed, and possibly modified. The goals of the camp council are as follows:

1. To stimulate boys to exercise positive leadership skills and to provide them with a quasi-official role in certain areas of program planning,

² William Schwartz, "Characteristics of the Group Experience in Resident Camping," *Social Work*, April 1960, pp. 91-96.

group problem solving, and open frank discussion of concerns that the boys may have.

2. To enable the boys to feel they are a part of program planning and structuring, thereby increasing their investment of themselves in the camp program.

3. To provide an official and direct channel of communication from boys to the top decision maker in the official camp structure.

4. To provide the camp supervisor with information on the concerns, frustrations, and "pulse" of the boys.

5. To broaden the boys' perspective in regard to the reasoning behind certain official policies, etc., and to enable the camp council members to view "both sides of the coin."

6. To provide a means whereby boys explain to other boys the camp rationale, values, and structure.

Camp council members serve a three-month term of office and may succeed themselves. The boys nominate boys to form a ballot. One camp has each youngster write down the names of six boys (the boy's ideal council). The nominations are collected and tabulated by a staff member, and the top ten names are placed on a ballot. The following day the boys vote by secret ballot. By having the boys nominate and vote while in the dining hall, staff are able to assist those who have difficulty reading and writing.

In the second camp the staff submits ten names and each boy submits ten names for nomination. The ten names receiving the most votes constitute a ballot and the boys vote the following day by secret ballot. The results of the two procedures seem to be similar. Members of the negative

leadership group, as well as members of the positive leadership group, will often be nominated and elected. The balance of the council varies from election to election, depending on the composition of the camp's population.

The basic structure for guiding camp council meetings is important. Both the members of the council and the population at large need to be made aware of and reminded of the expectations and limitations of the council. This enables the boys to know what to expect and demand from the council members—and demand they will.

Guidelines

The following guidelines provide the framework for the camp council:

1. Planning decisions made by the council are for the benefit of all campers.

2. Discussion topics are open to cover any area, *but* the tone and approach must be constructive and realistic and the discussion must not allow attacks on the character of others. (Experience with the council has shown that it is very effective in controlling a member who becomes destructive in his discussion.)

3. Discussion and planning of program functions must take into consideration the purpose, goals, and regulations of the camp. The council has often been used to plan holiday activities, parties, talent nights, and other special activities. Many valuable and challenging discussions have helped to resolve questions on the appropriateness of camp rules and purpose.

4. Information provided in council sessions is confidential. For example, a council member states that John

Doe is pilfering cigarettes from the lockers of other boys. This information, as such, cannot be used later by the staff leader to discipline the boy on a "camp-council-informed-me" basis. Rather, the council, with the guidance of the staff leader (who is the camp supervisor), is responsible for effecting a solution in the best (treatment) interests of the boys. One such solution is to approach the boy as a group, inform him that the council is aware of his behavior and concerned about it, and ask him to stop it. If he does not, he is told, the council will be forced to bring it to the attention of the camp supervisor as it is behavior detrimental to the camp.

Communication Channel

The camp council has been used effectively in both camps to resolve difficult boy-group problems, such as how to handle the scapegoat or the agitator. Racial problems, too, have been resolved more quickly and conflicts avoided because this communication channel was open to the camp supervisor. The boys have learned to trust this method of communication. The council will sometimes approach the camp supervisor with the demand that they see him immediately, in private, and will then tell him about a problem brewing between two groups of boys—a situation to which he might not otherwise have been alerted. On one such occasion the council suggested that I walk to a certain area of the camp (a spot behind the barracks building) and keep my eyes open, because they did not want to become involved in either way. Although they were saying they did not want to be involved, by suggesting that I move to a certain area

they were offering a solution to the problem.

Group leaders who would otherwise be strong advocates for negative values often modify their positions and their values through the experience of being on the camp council.

THE BIG BROTHER PROGRAM

The incoming delinquent is completely dependent upon other offenders and upon staff for all social gratifications and deprivations, and for many definitions of cognitive reality. Thus, other clients serve as a major socialization agent to organizational practices and perspectives. As in any social system, clients rank actors and behave towards them in terms of a set of relevant criteria. The new client must, if he or she is to gain status and its rewards, adequately meet these criteria.³

This observation makes it apparent that a socialization pattern is needed as a tool toward achievement of treatment goals. Because of the demands placed on the incoming boy by the other youngsters, it is to the advantage of the camp and the treatment process if the demands of the other boys are modified and that they incorporate some of the values of the formal system. The "big brother" technique has proven effective in doing this by facilitating the boy's adjustment.

New boys are assigned to a big brother during their first day at camp. The big brother is selected by the camp supervisor on the basis of his demonstrated leadership and maturity. He has usually been in the program for four months or more, has made a personal investment in camp activities, and has demonstrated a willingness to uphold some of the positive values of the official struc-

³ Zald, *supra* note 1, p. 65.

ture. The big brother must also have rapport with other boys. Although he may have a strong orientation toward the formal system, the big brother should not have difficulties in relating with the other boys. Those boys who are viewed as "staff lackeys" quickly lose influence with the new boys. The big brother technique is most effective, therefore, when it makes use of a member of the informal system who has, in addition, some positive value orientation.

Positive Orientation

The big brother becomes the first boy with whom the incoming delinquent has contact. The incoming boy is, therefore, immediately exposed to the success techniques of adaptation to institutional life. His relationship to the big brother reduces the initial influence of negative youngsters who would otherwise expose the boy to "con" techniques and the negative rationalizations used by the informal system.

The big brother keeps the new boy from being "pushed around" by other boys and helps him over his initial periods of homesickness. He is responsible for the new boy for one week. Occasionally the relationship evolves into friendship; sometimes a big brother will keep an eye on his little brother, unobtrusively, even after the first week.

The big brother is responsible, too, for helping the boy learn the routines and expectations of institutional life. There have been several instances where a big brother has brought his little brother to the office and said, "Talk with Mr. X, because he can help you with your problem." Staff were given an opportunity in these cases to help a new boy resolve a

problem, usually the temptation to be a truant; otherwise they might not have been aware of the boy's problem at all. Without the intervention of the big brother, the new boy would be less apt to contact staff, with whom he had not yet formed a trusting relationship. By turning to peers for problem solving, he would, therefore, be susceptible to their negative solutions.

Helper Therapy

Another significant aspect of the big brother role is the positive change which often takes place in the attitude and behavior of the big brother. This has been referred to as the "helper therapy principle," which postulates that the people giving help profit from their role as a helper, often to a greater degree than the people receiving help.⁴ This phenomenon has been noticed in those boys who serve as big brothers, as well as in members of the camp council. The big brother, in his efforts to help his little brother adjust to the program the "right" way, begins to reinforce his own thinking on these matters. He begins to view antisocial behavior with new understanding. When a boy comes to a staff member and says, "I can't do anything with Joe; he just doesn't seem to care," he is perceiving the negative behavior in a broader perspective, a perspective that comes when one views himself as being a part of the larger or legitimate community. The quote just given often is followed by another remark, such as, "Man! I used to be like that too, didn't I?"

⁴ Frank Riessman, "The 'Helper' Therapy Principle," *Social Work*, April 1965, pp. 27-32.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Community meetings (mass gatherings of all the boys in camp) provide another channel of communication between the informal and formal systems. The camp supervisor serves as discussion leader and moderator. The technique is used to examine and discuss problems that involve or influence, either directly or indirectly, the majority of the camp population.

To understand how this technique is used, let us look at an actual occurrence: A group of boys attending one of the local churches on Sunday had been abusing the privilege by going into the lavatory and spending most of their time there smoking, talking, and laughing. They were also involved in "snitching" doughnuts from the kitchen. Because the behavior of this group, or individuals within it, was creating a bad impression on the church and community toward the camp at large, it was decided that this problem involved the general camp population. The problem was presented at a community meeting and a lively discussion ensued. Opinions, both pro and con, were expressed by the boys as to what should be done. The boys were able, ultimately, to assume responsibility not only for what had taken place, but to see that future misbehavior of that nature would not be repeated. The boys involved (through their voluntary admission) were given minor disciplinary restrictions.

Shared Concern

The community meeting technique made the problem a shared concern. When the boys began to see the adverse effect that the negative behavior of a few was having on the total group, they were willing and able to

back up the legitimate values being upheld by the staff. The few boys involved in the negative behavior were not being reinforced by the peer group; therefore, the impetus to continue such behavior, and thereby gain peer status and approval, was lost.

The camp supervisor, in his moderator role, has to be adept at handling the sometimes hostile verbalizations individual boys will make against staff, institutions, and authority in general. However, once these expressions are made and reaction on the part of the moderator is objective and impersonal, the boys begin to be more objective in their analysis of the problem being discussed. Some of the same guidelines used in camp council discussions are also applicable to the community meetings.

The maximum bed capacity of the camps is fifty each—the maximum number of boys that can be adequately handled in a community meeting technique. Larger institutions may use the community meeting approach on a cottage level.

Summary

Certainly one of the prime goals of rehabilitation is to keep before delinquent youth the basic value of one's personal responsibility toward others. The use of the informal system—through the techniques described—provides a greater opportunity for delinquent youths to take responsibility for others. Through the informal system, the social work contacts between worker and client become more meaningful since the client is also receiving reinforcement from the peer group to change his attitudes and behavior and to learn new social skills.