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SOME COMMENTS: SCHOOL, FAMILY AND THE SOCIAL WORKER *

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The previous paper has covered a good deal of ground. In the present discussion, taken from the point of view of a social worker, several reactions, ideas, and questions may be raised as a point of departure. One may, in fact, begin with the reference to the idea of sub-culture and its frequent misuse by social scientists. It seems reasonable that reference to deviant sub-culture often fails to take into account the fact that even deviant behavior may be structured and patterned according to the norms of the so-called majority.

This point has particular meaning in view of the fact that social workers and social scientists have at times had difficulties in communicating because they seem to be dealing with different faces of the empirical world. The social scentist, on the one side, addresses himself most often to modal behavior. The social worker, on the other, deals primarily with exceptional behavior. The observation here offers us a common point of departure, for, whether one is primarily concerned—as is the anthropologist—with patterns of conformance, or—as is the social worker—with patterns of deviation, it seems unquestionably desirable that we have as a common frame of reference some clarity about the generally held expectations of the dominant culture.

With respect to this dominant culture, it is pointed out that there is, in fact, a definitive American culture, an essential structural sameness to American life, an organic integrity and wholeness which makes apparent variation appear insignificant in comparison. We have heard all about us much reference to this as an age of conformity. Without debating the evidence on which such observations are based, one may proceed for discussion's sake from an assumption of the observation's validity to draw out an argument of relevance to the social worker.

If it is true that contemporary culture encompasses but a narrowing or constricting band of previously acceptable behavior, then it may also follow that attitudes and behavior which at one time were accommodated by the culture may now be viewed as deviant

or exceptional. Put another way, the conclusion that this is an age of relative conformity over the past would of necessity have relevance both to the quality and the quantity of what is regarded as deviant or exceptional. It may be that the more highly specialized the social institutions of a culture become, the less their capacity to accommodate broad ranges of unrelated behavior, and the greater the probability that certain types of behavior would be conceived by the culture as deviant or exceptional.

One could raise the question, for example, as to when a given block of behavior becomes a subject for clinical consideration. When does a person's behavior bring him into the orbit of clinical services? Does the answer rest primarily in the inherent properties and characteristics of the person's intrapsychic life? For example, are the sickest people, by some psychiatric standards, the ones who are necessarily most often in treatment? Or—put another way—are the people active in the caseloads of our country's clinicians necessarily the most disturbed psychiatrically?

Mental illness, as an example of deviant behavior, can be thought of as a product of the reciprocal relationship between behavior, on the one hand, and situational tolerance on the other. The disequilibrium we call illness may occur either as the result of shifts in the personality or in the level of situational tolerance. That mental illness may be regarded as culturally deviant behavior can be illustrated by the situation of the runaway patient in New York City (diagnosed as schizophrenic, who was later found in Virginia as a respected and successful palmist). Is psychopathology a matter of geography? Nor is this necessarily true only of mental disorders. Physical illness as such has a distinctly social or situational dimension. For example, few of us could qualify as astronauts; nor is it expected that the physical and psychological characteristics of the astronaut are necessary for daily living. If they were, all of us would suddenly be designated as ill and become suitable candidates for nursing home care without any actual change having taken place in our physical condition. A reduced level of situational tolerance could-re-define health into illness with no intrinsic change in the condition of the subject.

Once we introduce situational determinants into the definition of illness, we come hard upon the subject of culture and its expectations. David Landy, writing in December, 1958, issue of the *Social Service Review*, indicates this relationship when he proposes to examine the trends and apparent conflicts in American society through the manner in which they seem to be imbedded in the psychoses and neuroses of hospitalized patients. Is it possible that the clinical forms and syndromes with which we deal are themselves matters of fashion and vogue, and far from representing any inherent truths about people; that they are transitory and fluctuating with respect to the broader changes of the culture, so that what we deal with is in a true sense culture-bound and determined? One wonders if high rates of officially reported deviation are logically related to the ascendance of patterns of conformity in the expectations of the culture. It seems

noteworthy that at a time when conformity is so much emphasized that deviation should be reported at an all time high. Thus reference to deviation relates to what is statistically significant for the clinician and not something of a magnitude sufficient to alter a picture of statistical normality or modality for the culture. Thus the eccentric aunt or uncle who fifty years ago was part of the life stream of family existence may, from the community point of view, be officially diagnosed as schizophrenic and require hospitalization as family capacity to accommodate such behavior is reduced.

One could speculate that the increase in deviant behavior all about us, the rising statistics on mental illness, the asocial behavior of juvenile and adult offenders, the rapid increase in official disorders of all kinds, is as much attributable to a sharply contracting range of acceptable behavior with the resultant increase in what comes to be regarded as deviant, as to any real increase in the incidence of intrapsychic conflict. In noting this, it is recognized that the separation of external and internal influences is itself probably artificial.

There is, nonetheless, value in such a formulation. It seems that insofar as we persist in viewing the expectations of our society and of our culture as fixed, and the reactions of people to these expectations as the variable to be treated in the direction of enhancing social adjustment, to that extent do we persist in addressing ourselves to but one dimension of the reciprocal relationship between the person and his situation and we thereby fail to realize the magnitude of the problem to be solved.

It might be legitimate to ask what is the role and place of the helping professions in the macracosm of the culture. Is our relationship to culture necessarily a passive one? Do we, as clinicians, have a responsibility for cultural innovation and change? Can this be a deliberate and conscious process? Is it our task to understand cultural expectation and to adjust people to it (reality)? When is it soundest from a mental health point of view to be maladjusted? Where might we conclude that the situation is pathological, and that maladjustment is consequently an expression of health rather than of pathology? Is it a sign of health or of pathology to be maladjusted to unemployment, inadequate housing, inadequate health care, racial or religious discrimination, social isolation and competitiveness which precludes the possibility of warmly intimate, personal relationships?

It may now be possible to turn directly to considerations of the school. The view has been expressed that the school is *not* to learn. The school serves rather as substitute for the socializing and social training functions of the family. It affirms and preserves not only ideological and ideational norms, but aspects of behavior which promote the maintenance of the totality of American society as we know it.

Again, without debating the question of whether this should be or in fact, is a *primary* function of the school in our society, let us pursue the observation further and ask what the role of the social

worker within the school is—the social worker who is concerned not
primarily with instruction and curriculum but with social behavior.
There is little doubt that the social worker within the school situ-
ation serves as an agent of social control. Weisman and Chwast,
writing in the November, 1960, issue of *Social Casework,* describe
clinical services as one of society's alternate ways of exercising social
control of persons who manifest deviant behavior, even though
such services may rarely be regarded in this way. A treatment serv-
ice, the purpose of which is to enhance an individual's social func-
tioning, most certainly contains an element of control. Do we see
our services in this way? Do we see our role as social control agents
of society? Do we accept this as a legitimate and proper professional
role? Where do the knowledge and experience of the clinician offer
opportunities for meaningful feedback and the influence on culture?

CONSTRICTING FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY. It has been pointed out
that all of the social institutions of society are in dynamic equilibrium,
with each significantly altered by changes occurring in the other.
Special note has been taken of the constricting nature of the family's
function and composition which has led to the assumption of re-
sponsibilities by the school for functions previously carried by the
family.

To an increasing extent the family seems to be developing into a
highly specialized administrative agency—one that seeks out and
coordinates the services of other individuals and institutions and pro-
vides fewer and fewer direct services of its own for fewer and fewer
people. While there is abundant proof that there has been no re-
pudiation of the basic business of reproduction, housing, feeding
and child rearing, the family seems now to concentrate on personality
development of its members, and above all to provide warmth, love
and sanctuary from the anonymity of urban existence. These are
services that no other institution in our society is able to provide.
The result has been to create a problem of the first order, for that
growing number of people in our society who presently have no fam-
ily to be part of. While it is true that the school has moved more
actively into the role of meeting the developmental needs of chil-
dren, no other institution has as yet moved firmly and assuredly into
the position of providing care for the grandmothers and grandfathers,
maiden aunts and bachelor uncles who are no longer part of the
family's daily experience. Under the press of family mobility, of
movement in pursuit of economic and vocational advancement, the
family has been redefined as one involving a nuclear grouping of
mother, father and minor children, with everyone else vaguely re-
garded as a relative often living hundreds or thousands of miles away.

These changes on the family's part have had enormous repercus-
sions for other social institutions. We see the industrial corporation,
the labor union, the trade and professional association, government,
the church—all involved actively in moving into the breach left by
contracting family functions. Government seems to be leading the way

among the several institutions. It seems somewhat paradoxical that a cultural value orientation which has always emphasized individuality, competitiveness and aggressiveness unencumbered by external control and even social responsibility should lead unrelentingly toward the growing involvement of government on a provisional and not merely protective basis in the most intimate daily affairs of people.

How, in fact, do the school and the school social worker serve the social training and social control needs of society?

(1) We expect, in the United States, that people will move in pursuit of educational and vocational advancement, that they will be willing to do this, sacrificing ties to friends and family without, at the same time, being emotionally starved or incapacitated by the separation. Training for such attitudes starts very young. One might even say that a principal goal of child rearing in the United States is to help children leave home as quickly and efficiently as possible. The young mother who leaves her five year old at kindergarten may feel proud if her child is so secure, so lacking in a need for reassurance, that he can leave his mother comfortably and go immediately to play with the other children and to place himself under the care of a strange teacher. The mother may feel very guilty, may feel as though she has failed at her mothering responsibilities if confronted with the horrible prospect of tears and unwillingness to be separated on the child's part. The school, in turn, will reinforce such attitudes by limiting the mother's access to the child in the classroom, and overtly or implicitly expressing disapproval of what may come to be called over-protection. If the usual social controls, which involve shame and guilt, do not operate, a social worker may have to be dispatched in order to help the mother and the child "adjust to reality"; that is, to bring their behavior into conformance with the expectation of the culture.

(2) An individual focus on self-development, self-attainment and accomplishment best meets the needs of our kind of economy. The basic identity is self-identity rather than family or group identity. Let us look at the school banking program. Some time ago I became annoyed at the way my children would compete over which of them had most money on deposit in the school bank account. I asked myself how real it was for them to use the level of deposit as an index to their relative wealth when the facts were that no one in our family could really make a purchase without regard to the financial situation and needs of the total family. I spoke to the school about having the three children deposit money in one family account. Since this was unheard of by the school, I was referred to the Vice-President of the First National Bank. He, too, had never heard of such an absurd idea and lectured me on the important qualities of individual thrift. The school and the bank were not the ultimate weapons in checking this bit of deviant behavior on my part, since the matter had ultimately to be dropped in any case because the I.B.M. machines in use at the bank would not accommodate such

a system. We ought not lose sight of the lesson offered by this home-spun example, that is, that our science and technology are as culture-bound and determined as any other aspect of life. They answer, in fact, the questions put by the culture.

(3) I talked recently with a woman who asked our help in having her child, who was born in January, enrolled in public school one year ahead of what is routine. Her argument was that this child was quite mature and could well handle the work of kindergarten and sub-sequent grades, but more importantly, there was an only sibling in this family who was currently in the kindergarten. It was the woman's hope that in having the children in consecutive grades a closeness of relationship and commonality of interest could be sustained. The school had refused to consider an exception. What was, of course, involved here—as in the previous illustration—is a basic conflict in the culturally rooted way of thinking. In one instance the family group and its welfare was the frame of reference and point of de-parture; in the second, the individual, his self-development, his self-attainment, were the basic points of departure and frame of reference for decision-making.

(4) Most of the youngsters in our schools will in the future work in large-scale organizations where impersonal qualities predominate. Everybody in such an organization is potentially replaceable, for the replaceability of the human parts of an organization has be-come necessary if the whole is not to be at the mercy of upward mobility of employees, disease and retirement. I am impressed by the extent to which many of our public schools, particularly our large high schools, are excellent training centers for such future vo-cations. In such a setting, little of the physical equipment is our own, or anybody else's own. Things adhere to positions, successively filled by different persons. Relationships with peers and with teachers are largely superficial, transitory and impersonal, much as they are in the large factory or corporation. In the public school there is heavy turnover of the human parts of the organization, a factor charac-teristic of modern bureaucratic organization.

CONCLUSION. Social work is certainly attuned to the psychological factors which impinge upon the situation of child, family, and school. The physical and organic factors are well accounted for in general. We are indebted to the anthropologist for his help in seeing the school in its broad, culturally-defined role, and particularly for his help to us in becoming *conscious of ourselves* and our own role within the broader culture. Problem definition is prerequisite to problem solution. To the extent that we become more deliberately aware of the cultural significance of our own professional activities, to that extent is there some hope that constructive use can be made of such awareness.