

NEW THINKING
about institutional care



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ABOUT
INSTITUTIONAL CARE**

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SUMMING-UP THE CONFERENCE

~~OLIVE STEVENSON~~

The education committee of the A.S.W. knew that in promoting this Conference it was taking a risk. The vital question was—could we in such a short space of time identify sufficient common elements and common concerns to make this Conference meaningful? We knew that we would have at the Conference considerable diversity in the establishments represented and in the roles played by members in relation to these establishments. ~~Readers of this pamphlet will see how great this diversity was.~~ It was not easy for people concerned with prisons to communicate effectively with those from children's homes; and we are all familiar with the problems of communication which arise from the different roles of fieldworker, administrator and residential worker. Our intention was not to gloss over differences—which indeed we hoped would emerge; but there would have been no point in having a Conference if the aims or significance of different forms of institutional care could find no common ground beyond vague generalisations.

~~Only the members of the Conference can say if we succeeded.~~ There are certainly a number of factors which make it difficult to think generically about institutions. Two such factors of importance are differences in size and complexity of organisations. A third factor which makes for difficulty in generalising about institutions is concerned with the degree of their totality and of their communication with the outside world. This makes it hard, for instance, for wardens of hostels to identify with the world of the hospital or prison. A fourth is concerned with the aims of the institution. Within one institution one may find a number of different aims, some complementary, some antagonistic. Amongst the aims discussed at the Conference were: custody; treatment (or therapy in its widest sense); rehabilitation; and the 'holding' or 'caring' aim which seemed especially applicable to the aged and to children. Listening to the discussions, it has seemed that we can see all institutions as combining these elements in varying degrees and we do not find too much difficulty in establishing genuine communication. Much more painful and problematic is the question of a punitive aim. It is clear that an *unconscious* need to punish may be expressed in many different kinds of institution by certain individuals, whether they are working in children's homes, hostels, old people's homes or anything you care to name. But the conscious expression of punitive aims by society generally has largely disappeared in relation to all institutions except those concerned with adult criminals. (A possible addition is a category of juvenile offenders labelled as tough, not in need of welfare, and sent to detention centres). Of course, those who claim enlightenment seek 'the reform' and 'the rehabilitation'

of the offender, not his punishment. But it would be dishonest not to admit that in the minds of a substantial section of the community prisons are, at least partly, for punishment. These same citizens would not now say the same of mental hospitals as compared with their ancestors in the days of Bedlam.

This in my view made it more difficult to get the prison into our conceptual framework about institutions at the Conference. Nobody at the Conference would have consciously subscribed to a punitive aim for prisons. But those who work in them and for them are constantly exposed to the conflict and tension of openly incompatible objectives. The history of institutions shows very clearly our need to lock the bad and the dangerous parts of ourselves away from sight. Perhaps the prison is the last bastion of institutionalised hate.

In what ways, nevertheless, did we find common ground? We found it, not so much in an intellectual frame of reference—despite the real intellectual content of many of the papers—as in an emotional frame of reference. For this was in many ways a conference highly charged with emotion because of the profound feelings the theme stirred within us. We did not talk a great deal about administration or organisation; we did not study at any depth problems of hierarchy, communication or delegation—on any of which we might have chosen profitably to focus our attention. Therefore it is upon feelings that I wish to centre most of my summing up. I believe that it is in understanding of them that we will find our common ground, whether we are thinking about children's homes or prisons.

Reference was made continually ~~by group leaders~~ to ambivalence about institutions; on the one hand to idealisation—longings for perfect institutions which care in the way the community cannot care; on the other hand to denigration—to the institution representing the harsh, angry side of human nature and a denial of human rights. Why are we so conflicted?

We are conflicted because the institution symbolises in a most dramatic form longings and fears which go to the roots of our being.

One such longing is for freedom. The institution may represent a final threat to freedom. This is obvious enough in prisons, but what of the children's homes where benign overprotection and lack of privacy may act as a similar, but hidden, threat. I am reminded of *The Bridgeburn Days* by Lucy Sinclair,¹ an account of life in the old cottage homes, where duty and rigidity were the framework within which the children's lives were confined.

"Besides all the work in Matron's house and the boys' and girls' cottages, there were the mats to be made. Miles of knitting they must have done in their day when the other jobs were finished, and miles and miles of clippings they must have cut up and prodded into the hessian with its nasty bitter smell. Ah, the tedium of spending the school holidays at this hated task. In our house we had the most, the thickest and the newest mats of all. But what a price they cost in weariness and sad longing to be free. Free to rush about and play, free in a dozen little things that make for gladness, like the runaway horses belonging to a farmer in the village which every now and then would break loose and come galloping round the cottage homes, till,

with manes flying, they would dash away up the hill road, the sound of their going like strange, exotic music, a joyous tattoo that echoed and re-echoed long after the horses were lost to sight. It was the music of the wild and free. Our Ma alone remained unmoved by their coming and going. But the girls would return to their work with sparkling eyes and happy hearts, and when the next morning came there was always one to say wistfully, "I wish this was yesterday when the horses came!"

The symbols of freedom to Lucy Sinclair were the horses; it seems that to many they have been birds. Anna Frank watched the seagulls circling above the house in which she was hiding, and spoke of freedom; we know of the 'Birdman of Alcatraz' and of other prisons where the care of seabirds has become a major preoccupation of prisoners. I recall an incident when a student was visiting a school for seriously physically handicapped children. She was invited, amidst secrecy and excitement, to visit their den. Inside the hut, on a shelf, as a kind of altar, was a model of a bird; a bird which epitomised the physical freedom which these children could not achieve. Perhaps it is not only the outsider looking in, nor the 'captive', be he prisoner or child, but the residential staff also who fear the loss of this vital dimension to their lives. ~~In her talk,~~ ~~Mrs. Flood spoke~~ ^{heard} of the fantasy some residential child care staff may have of the freedom of field staff: freedom to drive away and leave their problems behind. Yet we know that true freedom is not finally and inextricably bound up with places, with bricks and mortar, although within some institutions the integrity of the self may be threatened. We know that outside the walls we may be captives of our own inner drives and compulsions and that freedom is for many of us illusory. We choose our own symbols of freedom; birds, wide open spaces, holidays. For all of us then the institution is a symbol of a threat to freedom, in part a projection on to bricks and mortar of our inner fear. Yet we know that limits on freedom are necessary for everyone and that, for some, external constraint is necessary because internal constraint has not been adequately established. We desire freedom and yet we do not desire it. For we also desire dependence.

The institution offers great and frightening possibilities of dependence; in this lies attraction and revulsion. Will increased comfort and amenities in institutional care make its inmates reluctant to leave it? Will the arms of the institution embrace so warmly that the baby will have no incentive to grow up? It is not without significance that one discussion group at the Conference was moved to talk of the provisions of the welfare state generally, which carries similar overtones about dependency. Yet we want the institution to provide for some a caring experience, we want it for some to be an asylum.

The dictionary gives alternative definitions of the word. The first and earliest is: "a sanctuary for criminals and debtors from which they cannot be taken forcibly without sacrilege". At first glance, this is less relevant to our purposes, yet the definition is not without some applicability to counter the more extreme forms of community care. The second definition is worth learning by heart as a constant reminder of one purpose of our institutions: "an asylum is a

benevolent institution affording shelter and support to some class of the afflicted, the unfortunate or the destitute". In all our talk of treatment and rehabilitation we should recognise this continuing function of shelter and support. In *Ventures in Professional Co-operation*,² Dr. Hayward wrote of mental hospitals:—

"We must always remember . . . that it is desirable that they should not only be places in which patients can get better but also places in which they can be ill and can be supported in their illness, until such time as they are able (or not able) to allow themselves to get better . . ."

In order to tolerate the dependency which this implies, we have to understand something of our own attitudes to dependency so that we do not reject out of fear those who need, temporarily or permanently, to be dependent on the institution.

Turn over the coin of dependence, however, and we find power. For the dependence of others on us means our power over them. This is yet another aspect of institutions which we find frightening. The word "manipulation" cropped up in the Conference often; sometimes apologetically, sometimes with a kind of self-conscious assurance. The problem of our power to influence or persuade people to do certain things, to behave in certain ways is, of course, a recurrent theme of social workers; but the nature of institutions and the problem which causes the person to live in them, be it old age, childhood, mental illness or crime, makes for a peculiar vulnerability in the inmates. In *Love, Power and Justice* Tillich³ writes of power:—

"Every encounter, whether friendly or hostile, whether benevolent or indifferent, is in some way, unconsciously or consciously, a struggle of power with power . . . For this is the price which must be paid for the creativity of life. Such struggles start in the individual in the moment of his conception and go on up to the moment of his last breath. They permeate his relations with everything and everybody he encounters . . . It is not unjust that in the struggle between power and power, one of the beings involved shows a superior power of being. The manifestation of this fact is not unjust but creative. But injustice occurs if in this struggle the superior power uses its power for the reduction or destruction of the inferior power. This can happen in all forms of personal encounters. *Most frequent are those forms in which the personal encounter occurs within the frame of an institutional structure and the preservation and growth of the institution gives the pretext for unjust compulsion*" . . . (my italics)

What Tillich says is quite fundamental to those of us who are concerned with the development of professional skill in relationships. Caseworkers have begun to make their peace with the idea of influencing the people they seek to help and with the inescapable "they and us" which this power creates. What we have to assure ourselves of—and this is no easy matter—is that the power is being used to promote the growth of other human beings. And I would use this phrase even in relation to old people's homes, as the old prepare for death. There are two strong forces which work against such an aim. One is the facility with which we make assumptions about what is good, *i.e.*, growth producing, for other people. Our obligation is to examine such assumptions with great care in the light of growing knowledge about individual and cultural factors in others and in ourselves. (The care of the aged poses special problems here;

we have not been old, as we have been children. How do we know, for example, that they want to be kept busy?) The second, and in some ways even more frightening, force which pulls against the individual's need for growth, is the need of the organisation to run for its own benefit rather than for its inmates. This is particularly prone to happen as institutions increase in size and the resultant 'depersonalisation', of which we are now so conscious, seems sometimes a product of the machine taking on a life of its own and losing sight of its objectives, rather than deliberate inhumanity. Yet even in small institutions there is a need for continual vigilance here; lack of staff, overwork and committee demands for high material standards, for example, can create situations where the children and the aged become less important than the cleaning and the routine. Those outside who advise and support have a responsibility to help staff resist such pressures. Nevertheless we know that the greatest dangers lie in the largest institutions—the hospitals and the prisons. The book *Pentonville*⁴ by T. and P. Morris is probably the best known example of an institution where the machine appeared to have taken over the men.

In these three ideas of freedom, dependence and power lie most of our emotional problems about institutions. It is these we can surely all share, in these we find our common ground of fear and hope. It is probably for this reason that the idea of the therapeutic community, however qualified or diluted, holds its attraction. It reduces power, increases freedom and yet permits dependence. But all this is still a matter of degree—a fact which the more enthusiastic exponents of therapeutic communities have been inclined to gloss over. Power is still present, freedom and dependence are not limitless.

Another theme which was much discussed at the Conference was the relation of the 'inside' to the 'outside'. It has become a commonplace to point out that the barriers between the institution and the community have been breaking down. ~~The increase in hostel provision in various fields is an obvious example, and in Miss Julia's talk we heard of yet another bridge of special accommodation for the mentally ill, midway between life in the hostel and ordinary life in the community.~~ At the Conference we heard of the links Father Owen forged with the local community from his school for mal-adjusted children, and we heard also Mrs. Floud speak of the difficulties of a beginning Child Care Officer in going into children's homes. Important as it is that we should lower the barriers between the 'inside' and the 'outside' and improve communications, ~~think~~ we must hold to the fact that the institution, whether large or small, which is a going concern, does have a dynamic unity of its own and the outsider must, by definition, remain outside. The outsider has a role which is complementary but must accept that he cannot fulfil that role if he attempts to enter completely into the group processes of the institution. Perhaps here some fieldworkers must deal with their envy of those who work in successful institutions in which it is clear the members are sharing a valuable experience.

This Conference took place before the publication of the Williams' Committee,⁵ although there were rumours of its content which have

subsequently proved to be correct. Discussion groups were concerned with the question of training and, behind that, with the identification of the professional skill involved in residential work. The fundamental question was, of course—will the residential worker find his professional identity through a shared generic training in the fundamentals of institutional care? Or will he find it in service to a particular group of clients, alternating between field and residential social work? Since this summing up was given we know the Williams' Committee has come down in favour of the former solution. The feeling of the Conference was not clear about this. One is reminded of the arguments which raged fast and furious about generic training for casework and it is difficult to recapture now the emotions which that engendered. Nevertheless it does seem that there is an even wider gap to be bridged between institutional settings than there was between social work agencies. Some worry about the question of motivation for work with different clients, pointing out that this may differ profoundly between those who choose to work with children or old people. This does not seem to me to be the central issue. No-one is suggesting that these can or should be eliminated, any more than the drive to child care or medical social work has been eliminated by generic casework training. (Although our motivations can change and mobility is therefore desirable.) The central issue is—should the emphasis be placed on individuals-within-institutions or should it be placed on a phase or a problem of human development—children, old age, mental illness, crime—in order to give deeper understanding of the phase or problem and enrich co-operation of field and residential staff. This cannot be separated from our speculations about the recommendations of the Seeborn Committee, from which in any case far-reaching changes of existing specialisations may result. Thus, for example, it may be foolish to think of 'Child Care'—whether residential or fieldwork—as a continuing separate entry.

Most of us at the Conference took for granted the desirability of training for residential work. Nevertheless it is perhaps worth remarking that mixed in with this quite sincere desire there is some anxiety about the loss of spontaneity, of warmth and involvement which may result from an increase in self-conscious awareness of interpersonal processes. Such anxieties are familiar to all of us who train social workers and every group of students has to be helped with them. They have to be helped to lose and to recover their spontaneity as new knowledge of themselves and others becomes incorporated. I think it may be that such anxieties will manifest themselves even more strongly in connection with residential training, where the direct, day-long contact of person to person is integral to the situation and, in relation particularly to children, the spontaneous 'parenting' image dies hard. Behind all this I suspect there is a universal mourning for lost innocence. But the residential worker, as the fieldworker, must become professional to offer appropriate skilled services to disturbed and distressed people; equally important, his professionalism will provide a necessary

antidote to the bureaucracy which besets institutions and give him the courage to ask questions about its procedures.

In conclusion, I will restate what I believe to be the essentials of this Conference.

Residential work has an intensity all of its own which is brought about partly by its very containment within walls within which explosive feelings are held and generated. It is brought about also by the unconscious processes in which feelings about parents are acted out even more strongly than in other situations, because people are living under one roof. This reawakens their earlier feelings about home and family. This intensity is increased for the inmates by their dependency, with its undertones of the infantile state, and for the staff by their own feelings about parental authority. The residential worker carries also a more direct responsibility than does the fieldworker for finding a balance between what Tillich calls "proportional justice and creative justice".³ By this is meant fairness in its external sense, 'fair shares for all', and a deeper conception of fairness which responds to the peculiar needs of each individual. A boy at a school for maladjusted children said: "Fairness is no good to us lot, we each need something different". But in a sense, except in a most exceptional community, this is an over simplification. The residential worker has to find a mid way—and this is a daily problem of a practical and pressing nature.

For all these reasons, and many others, several discussion groups asked if people could be expected to do residential work for long periods or for a lifetime. One group spent time discussing ways out of residential work, whether by fieldwork or by supervisory posts or by early retirement. It is true that just as the self of the client may be threatened by institutionalisation, so the self of the worker may be threatened by the constant emotional invasion. The need for physical privacy is important; but behind it lies an even deeper need for psychological privacy which practical provision can facilitate but not create.

Lest → it appears that this summing up has been more concerned with the feelings of workers than of inmates, in conclusion we should remind ourselves of Miss Fletcher's distress when she heard the nurses, looking for her medical records, say: "We've lost Fletcher". Perhaps it is enough just to say "Don't let us lose Fletcher".

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2. Association of Psychiatric Social Workers: *Ventures in Professional Co-operation*, 1961.
3. Paul Tillich: *Love, Power and Justice*. O.U.P., 1954.
4. T. & P. Morris: *Pentonville*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.
5. *Caring for People*. "Staffing Residential Homes". Report of Committee of N.C.S.S. Allen & Unwin.

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