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SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE CORNERSTONE
FOR TREATMENT IN CHILDREN'S INSTITUTIONS

by

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ACQUISITIONS

One of the undeniable facts of life in these United States today is that we live in an organizational society.

Self survival depends increasingly on an individual's ability to understand and cope with the multitude of impersonal and seemingly arbitrary decisions, rules, and other behavioral standards promulgated by large organizations and their faceless agents.

School reports, psychological tests, police investigations, credit checks, and other devices insult personal privacy and have lasting, often untraceable effects. Vague standards and policies exercised by people from club memberships, universities, jobs, loans, and many other activities, opportunities, and benefits.

Survival as a self respecting person hinges upon an individual's ability to evaluate whether in such circumstances he has been dealt with justly or not. Individuals who lack this ability are more prone toward accepting arbitrary decisions--such as a job rejection--as factual reflections of personal inadequacy. Repeated self-demeaning evaluations of this sort can easily lead to a feeling of worthlessness and thereby increase the risks of occurrence of mental or behavioral problems.

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Children generally lack the sophistication to separate just from unjust social experiences. Children referred to children's institutions are of special concern, since they have as a group often experienced a series of incompletely understood social events leading to institutionalization.

By virtue of their limited life experiences, children personalize events. (Fanciful therapists brand much of this as fantasizing.) The effort to understand events coincides with the effort to understand self, and often this means assuming responsibility for events beyond their ability to interpret in any other way. Left to their own devices, children will often find a reason to conclude that they are being institutionalized for some unspecifiable personal failings.

It is hard to imagine a child facing institutionalization who does not have on his mind the questions, Why am I here?; What did I do?; How long will I stay?; What will they do to me?; Where will I go next?

The practice of social justice in an institutional setting begins at this point, with these or similar questions. Social justice must be learned, and the ability to separate just from unjust persons, acts, and events is a skill of extreme importance to the child in preparing for adult living in a highly complex organizationally-oriented world.

The one unique feature of children's institutions is that they are organizations within which children live out whole time segments of their developing years. Children's institutions, therefore, can be viewed as powerful resources--perhaps the most powerful--for preparing children for adult living in today's world, or conversely, for laying the ground work for docile acceptance or hostile rejection of an impersonal arbitrary society upon reaching adulthood.

From this perspective at least, it is not difficult to reason that socially just organizational treatment can yield rich benefits for children by way of preparing them to understand, evaluate, and cope with the organizational society they will face.

What Is Social Justice for the Child?

Social justice is defined by and measured in terms of

fulfillment of a listing of every individual child's personal rights.

Importantly, many of these rights are human rights, not politically or legally established rights.

Children have few rights by law other than physical protection from abuse, neglect, or exploitation for labor, and they are not empowered to act in their own behalf to secure an extension of their legal rights.

Children are also nonpolitical beings in the sense that they cannot vote or exercise their claims in democratic processes.

For these reasons, children can be taught both political and legal processes--they are quite capable of digesting abstractions--without learning much of value to them about justice and just treatment.

Some of the most disenchanted (to put it mildly) adolescents I have known have been through institutions employing a program of "structured democracy", where the purpose is to teach adolescents the principles of democratic self government.

They do learn the principles in the abstract, but, to the extent to which they are truly left to govern themselves they employ the childhood techniques of group tyranny and ridicule to achieve control and order. What is really learned is another lesson in the use of arbitrary power and another life experience is added to previous experiences of similar stripe to reinforce their view that this is, indeed, the way the world works.

Legal and political processes are tools adults may use to extend children's rights, but being outside the realm of meaningful childhood experience they serve as poor models for programming children's experiences for purposes of learning about social justice.

Children learn social justice essentially from adults, not their peers, and adults cannot be effective in this task unless they are thoroughly knowledgeable about the human rights of children and given implementation of them their highest priority in their treatment of children. ((

If the general goal of all psychosocial treatment methods at minimum is preparation for socially nondeviant (unlawful) and personally satisfying community living, then any treatment made will be successful or unsuccessful to the extent to which it is based on social justice for the child.

The goal is not to create a child lawyer, politician, or social activist; rather the goal is to provide the child with a set of enduring standards for evaluating the degree to which persons, acts, and events filling his current life circumstances are just or not.

So armed, a child can face life circumstances in a way that will preserve and make possible the further growth of his own self respect. He will be able to identify unjust persons and acts thereby aborting the process of personalizing negative interpretations of himself and, coincidentally, he will be able to identify and respond to just persons and acts opening the way to further growth as an individual.

In interpersonal relations, the child will be able to minimize the risks in trusting unjust persons while preserving the capacity to openly trust those who can return that trust.

This goal for the child may be approached, as noted, by many treatment methods; however, it is achievable only through the persistence of adults in interpreting the just and unjust aspects of daily life experiences with a child, employing throughout for the child's benefit, children's human rights as standards for interpretation.

What Are a Child's Rights in Institutional Processes?

To summarize, implementation of children's rights is the central, common task of institutional personnel. Implementation of children's rights is held to be basic to the delivery of social justice, and social justice is viewed as the essential condition for child growth and development.

The basic rights of an institutionalized child are deemed to be the following.

1. The Right to Basic Life Protections and Safeguards While Institutionalized

These rights are partially supported by law, regardless of a child's current living circumstances. In essence children have the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, and physical health. As stipulated in state and federal legislation, children have the right to protection from neglect, abuse, and exploitation for labor.

While these rights to basic protections are generally met today, some institutional practices related to utilizing resident children for public relations and fund raising activities are worthy of scrutiny relative to the degree to which they are exploitative.

2. The Right to Daily Life Experience Patterned as Closely as Possible to that a Child Would Receive in a Good Home of Similar Socio-economic Level

There is a tendency in many institutions toward developing elaborate on-grounds programs to comprehensively provide for a child's school learning, social behavior, recreational and other needs.

This approach can actually arrest child growth and development to the extent to which it seduces the child into preferring the benefits of institutional living to the practical realities of community living.

In short, a child does not have a right to protection from social experiences he normally would confront living in his own community.

It is difficult to see how providing the institutionalized child with material goods and organized experiences well beyond the capability of a good home (of socio-economic level similar to that from which a child came) to deliver can serve the goal of preparing the child for return to community living.

Making this right a reality requires that staff collectively accord highest priority to reviewing each child's daily life experiences by the following common sense standard: To what extent is the experience provided similar to or different from that which he would receive in a good home of similar socio-economic level.

This standard dictates that planning daily life experiences is the core of institutional services. It also follows that daily life experience in community must be maximized and must be under the guidance of appropriate community persons. Fulfilling the latter point minimizes the possibilities of exporting institutional behavioral standards through the presence of institutional staff supervising child experiences in community settings.

Finally, implementation of this right requires that the cottage parent(s) be made the central person(s) in the care and guidance of the child both in terms of on-grounds guidance and in mediating between the child and the community. This brings the child into a relationship with a caring adult similar to that experienced by a child living in his own home.

3. The Right to Full Knowledge and Understanding about What Is Being Done to Him and Why

Included under this heading is the child's right to know precisely the reason for his placement, the nature of the goals and plans for his treatment while in residence and for his eventual replacement, and the right to know what institutional staff think of him and how his behavior is evaluated. Included here is the child's right to review written material such as case recordings.

Importantly, the child has the right to understanding as well as knowledge in all matters dealing with planning and changing his circumstances and/or personality. This means that plans, goals, evaluation criteria and the like must be communicated in words the child is capable of grasping.

Nothing is more unjust--or less likely to success--than the development of an exotic jargon-laden treatment plan incomprehensible to the child.

Indeed, treatment plans couched in such language are often kept secret from children for fear that the child's limited understanding of the terms may result in psychic damage to him.

Moreover, dealing in diagnostic labels and similar terminology stereotypes the child, stripping him of his right to be seen as a unique individual.

If the child does not understand what is being done to and for him, the possibilities are greatly increased that the treatment goals will not be realized. It is difficult for anyone to actively collaborate in achieving a goal that remains either obscure or secret.

4. The Right to Privacy of Personal Possessions, Including Thoughts

A child has a right to both personal possessions and a right to his own thoughts. This includes the right to time alone to dream and fantasize, and the right to withdraw from social contacts--including the right not to develop rapport with staff--without being evaluated as personally selfish, psychologically odd, or socially deviant.

This right must be insured as a countermeasure to the pressures and standards common in all organizations toward sharing material goods, performing set roles in organized activities, and being probed as to one's thoughts about self and others who co-exist in the small social world of the institution.

Social justice can be demonstrated by staff and a child's growth in accepting and practicing it can be evaluated without in-depth probing of his thoughts. Given this, persistent efforts by staff to uncover the inner thoughts of children constitute an unnecessary invasion of privacy, an unjust practice.

Similarly, child conformance to a principle of indiscriminate sharing or participation reveals nothing of the child's sense of social justice. Rather, it may reflect an unjust demand that a child be indiscriminately yielding and/or mindlessly busy.

Put in another way, children are often judged favorably or unfavorably in terms of how receptive they are to treatment. Unfortunately, high receptivity to treatment may reflect capitulation by the child to overwhelmingly unjust staff practices.

In the long run, passive acceptance or hostile resentment are the only possible outcomes of such institutional processes for the child.

5. The Right to be Judged and Evaluated by a General and Uniform Set of Standards for Child Behavior

The institutionalized child has the right to be judged by the same standards generally applied to child behavior at the natural home and community levels.

Several sets of specialized standards, unfortunately, often take precedence in judging the behavior of institutionalized children. Among these are:

- a) Standards for assessing the degree of adjustment to the specialized environment of the institution. In this case, it is common to differentiate acceptable behavior in terms of the degree of child conformity to an institutional code of rules, traditions, and norms which frequently differ from community standards for behavior.
- b) Standards for assessing degree of receptivity to therapeutic treatment methods. In this case, child behavior is looked upon approvingly or disapprovingly in terms of a child's ability to fill the professional's definition of therapeutic success. If the treatment is successful, the child is O.K.; if it is not, the child is not.
- c) Standards for assessing the degree to which a child accepts an idealized model for child behavior based on social class mannerisms. In its most common form, this set of standards has to do with moving the child toward compulsive personal neatness, politeness toward adults (the yes sir, no ma'am syndrome), impeccable table manners, virtuosity in vocabulary, competitiveness in games, obsession with white collar career goals, and the like, which may be foreign to the child's past and inappropriate preparation for his future.

Consider in regard to this right, the use of psychotropic or mood altering drugs to control child behavior.

First of all, the confining environment of an institution might promote what is, for that setting, defined to be hyperactive (unacceptable) behavior.

In a community environment similar behavior might not occur at all, or if it does, it might occur unobserved or find acceptable outlets.

In an institutional setting these alternatives are less likely to exist. Depending on the specialized set of standards involved, the child might be seen as doing poorly because:

- a) He cannot adjust and conform to the institution,
- b) He cannot profit from the therapeutic method offered,
- c) He seems incapable of enthusiasm for "middle class" mannerisms.

Whatever the set of standards involved, a child defined disapprovingly as hyperactive is a prime candidate for expulsion or drug therapy (if the latter is available to the institution).

The administration of mood altering drugs may yield a child who is more conforming, more polite, and more receptive.

In short, a success results by any and all sets of specialized standards, except those perhaps of the broader community which might not define hyperactivity as it is expressed in that context as negative behavior.

Substantial injustice occurs here although such practices may never be seen as unjust by staffs of institutions exercising specialized sets of evaluation standards.

A second aspect of this right has to do with a uniform set of standards for behavior. It is not wholly uncommon for institutions to judge a misconduct on grounds less harshly than the same misconduct is judged when perpetuated in the community.

Drinking alcohol on grounds might yield a verbal reprimand for example, while if the child is caught doing this in the community expulsion might well follow. It would seem that the visibility of the behavior constitutes a potential threat to an institution's public image and is, therefore, dealt with more severely.

In sum, it is essential to the rights of the child in this matter that institutional staffs evaluate child behavior in terms of general community standards for approvable behavior--taking into account variations by social class level--and exercise a uniform set of standards across behavior in community and on grounds.

Exercising specialized sets of standards increases the possibilities that children will see adults as "phonies"; exercising a dual standard for evaluating behavior increases the prospects that children will see adults as hypocrites. In either case, such staff behavior is likely to be more productive of hostility or passivity than growth.

6. The Right to Make Personal Decisions Consistent with Age Level

The practice of social justice rests on the belief that a child grows and develops best under conditions of gradually increasing his responsibility for his own life.

Increasingly over time, the child should be accorded the right to manage his own appearance, select his own friends, spend his own money, and be free to learn from the successes and failures that accrue to risking personal judgment.

This right extends in institutional processes to having a voice in replacement planning, selection of therapeutic methods, assignment to cottages, and selecting activities to participate in beyond appropriate assigned duties, among other things.

As previously alluded to, the focus is upon extending the right to make decisions in daily life experiences, not in the context of an institutionally contrived structured democracy.

So called "milieu therapies" that seek to obliterate the real status and social distances between adults and children (call me by my first name staff syndrome), or transfer the proper organizational authority of staff persons to residents (seemingly a prime goal of "institutional republics" for older children) are substantial departures from community reality. Nowhere in the United States is there lawful community government by children under age 18.

Staff in structured democracies often transfer more authority to children than originally intended. Frequently, for example, guidance is de-emphasized and group interaction emphasized in the various approaches to "guided group interaction." The reason for this seems to be that staff are reluctant to impose their views and authority on the group process for fear of aborting the development of democratic (self-governing) capacities among the participating residents.

Without this guidance, children act on what they know, namely, personal likes and dislikes. These circumstances can yield the appearance of minimum democracy (majority rule replaces pecking order) but not necessarily social justice (the pecking order finds expression in a new medium).

Most important then, is that the child has the right to grow through decision-making and form self respect in the context of his own daily life experiences rather than in the context of contrived peer episodes.

At minimum, if structured democracy is employed, the resident child has all the previously discussed rights to full knowledge and understanding of the approach in advance of its implementation, the right to reject this therapeutic approach as inappropriate to his growth, and the right to resist group penetration of his inner thoughts and to reject or appeal to higher authority group interpretations of his social behavior.

7. The Right to Basic Life Protections and Safeguards Following Replacement to Community

To a large extent this right is self explanatory. In sum, a child has a right upon replacement not to be subject to the same or similar circumstances of abuse, neglect, dependency, or exploitation that contributed to his being institutionalized in the first place.

A child has a right, in other words, to participate in evaluating his replacement and to having errors or mistakes corrected either by provision of necessary supports in the replacement setting or by removing him to another more appropriate setting.

Concluding Remarks about Practice Implications

In this paper, social justice has been proposed as the primary guide for structuring institutional experiences to

achieve the goals of stimulating a child's psycho-social growth and maximizing his preparation for return to non-deviant, personally satisfying community living.

The practice of social justice in institutional settings is made possible by structuring the institutional experience to insure the implementation of each child's personal human rights.

The primary treatment goals in the practice of social justice are the implementation of children's rights by institutional staff and the growth of a sense of social justice among resident children.

Among the conditions that must be met to insure implementation of these goals are the following:

- a) The primary focus for observing, evaluating, and interpreting a child's behavior must be his daily life experiences in the context of peers, not the brief episodes he spends in therapy with professionals.
- b) The child's daily life experience must be structured to maximize experience in community under community supervision, to ensure exposure to realistic learning situations.
- c) The cottage parent must be the key person in the child's life while in residence. This requires restructuring the authority and responsibility levels in the cottage parent role as well as restructuring professional and administrative roles to make them supportive to the cottage parent.
- d) Staff must be oriented toward the primary treatment goals of the practice of social justice, knowledgeable about children's rights, and skillful in interpreting just from unjust aspects of daily life experience with children.

The above structural arrangements and staff orientations provide the basic mix for insuring that social justice will be central to the daily treatment of the child.

Structural arrangements constitute the pre-conditions for the exercise of staff orientations, knowledge, and skills.

Unless these conditions are met, the practice of social justice will be undermined. On the other hand, the best structural arrangements cannot guarantee the practice of social justice by institutional personnel.

Since it is held in this paper that children learn most of what they know about social justice from adults, a heavy responsibility falls upon administrators of children's institutions to recruit and otherwise develop staff oriented to, knowledgeable about, and skillful in the practice of social justice.

In sum, for those interested in implementing the practice of social justice as the primary mode of institutional treatment, three immediate steps must be taken:

- a) A review of structural arrangements must be performed to identify and modify impediments to the practice of social justice;
- b) Instruments and measures must be located or developed to enable recruitment and evaluation of staff as to adequacy of orientations, knowledge and skills; and,
- c) Admissions standards, diagnostic tools, and evaluation of progress measures must be found or developed capable of validly assessing each child's initial level of understanding about social justice and the extent to which it grows and expands over time.



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