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VOLUME I, SECTIONS I AND II

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VANDALISM IN HIGH SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATORY DISCUSSION*

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# INTRODUCTION

The dollar cost of the destruction of property on high school premises currently runs into the millions in major metropolitan areas and into the tens of thousands in smaller cities and towns. Even where this is a small percentage of a school system's total budget, it is still a symptom of serious inadequacy in the system.

The Youth in Illinois Project of the Institute for Juvenile Research spent three years (1971-1974) gathering data on many aspects of juvenile behavior in and out of school. The ethnographic component of this project has compiled 10,000 pages of field notes and interview material in which the thinking and behavior patterns of teenagers are documented in great detail. As we enter the final phase of analyzing and interpreting this information, we are helped to an accurate diagnosis of the causes of vandalism in high schools by being able to identify certain aspects of the situation of youth which may contribute to it.

## Symbolic Versus Pragmatic Action

The destruction of high school property can, in the minds of its perpetrators, serve either a symbolic or a pragmatic purpose, or it can serve both. We will make

the argument that high school vandalism is, at the present time, mostly symbolic action, very seldom conceived of as an act of instrumental pragmatism.

Symbolic action is meaningful in itself. It is a form of communication in which the actors define the world and their places in it as an orderly whole which gives each participant a legitimate basis for a sense of personal worth. The audience for symbolic action can be as wide as the whole of society or as narrow as oneself alone. The degree of sophistication can range from the complexity of traditional solemn rituals to the inarticulate groping of a disturbed individual. But in every case, symbolic action is a statement containing a message. This is its purpose, the source of its satisfaction to the performer, and the ground for correctly interpreting it.

Pragmatic action as we consider it here is a means to an end. It is not meaningful in itself, but only in the context of the goals it leads to.

A symbolic act of high school vandalism could be on the material level, anything from littering to arson. On the level of motivation, intent, and purpose, however, symbolic acts of vandalism simply state a message. This message could be hatred for what the school stands for

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in the mind of the actor. It could be a demonstration
of personal valor for a sympathic crowd of peers. These
are but two among many specific meanings the symbolic
act could have.

Pragmatic destruction of high school property could
be, for instance, the freezing of locks in order to provide
unobserved access for the purpose of theft or sabotage.
Pragmatic arson could be conceived of as a paramilitary
act designed to cripple the institution, weaken society,
lead to revolution, etc.

When examining the vandalism committed in any
institution over a given period of time, it is important
to make this distinction between smybolic and pragmatic
action, for the least costly and most effective responses
to the two different kinds of vandalism are very different.
In particular, to assume that vandalism is pragmatic when
it is in fact symbolic could easily lead to a vicious cycle
of expensive and harsh security measures, and further
symbolic vandalism.

### The Half-Culture of American Youth

Current interpretations of youthful misbehavior in
America  tend to oscillate between the poles of psychic
pathology and counterculture conspiracy. The activities

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of gangs as well as of individuals are often seen as
cases of motivational pathologies.  Granted that some
youthful misbehavior is the product of pathology and some
is the product of an articulated counterculture or dissenting
ideology, the importance of each of these two sources of
behavior can only be understood against the background of
youthful subculture itself.  With regard to the current
wave of vandalism in high schools, reliance on theories
of pathology and of conspiracy leads to an obvious absurdity:
We have either widespread insanity or organized revolution.

Based on the data from the Youth in Illinois Project,
we propose that many forms of youthful misbehavior
(particularly vandalism in high schools) are rooted in the
normal dynamics of culture among American youth.  That is,
as youth reflect on their situation of growing up in
America they form various sets of concrete values, forming
what could be called youthful subcultures.  These values
are essentially reasonable bases on which to give themselves
models of the world and models for their own behavior.  They
are based on group experience, and therefore have a taken-
for-granted consensual aspect.  Although youthful subcultures
vary in content with locale, ethnicity, socioeconomic status,
and other factors, they have a common structural characteristic

which warrants our speaking of the half-culture of American youth.

The prima facie evidence for speaking of a youthful half-culture is that the pathology and conspiracy theories offer unsatisfactory explanations of youthful misbehavior. To explain the persistence and wide distribution of vandalism, for example, it makes provisional and intuitive sense to look for the source of this behavior in the normal course of youthful response to the experience of their social situation. Such slim evidence is, of course, insufficient in itself to support a full-blown theory. But once we open this line of inquiry, we find in the data from the Youth in Illinois Project exactly the kind of evidence we need.

What we are calling a half-culture must be understood in comparison with a fully developed culture. A fully developed culture is an integral meaning system, based on group experience, formulated in articulated symbols which are socially understood and accepted. A fully developed culture takes time to mature, is not easily changed, and elicits great loyalty and requires great energy from its members. Culture is developed around the relationship between intuitions and symbols. The process of creating culture could be referred to as intuitions seeking articulated symbols. The term half-culture designates a group whose

intuitions of values have found some legitimate
articulation, but not enough to support a fully autonomous
group project.

Clearly, then, the concept of a half-culture is not
a mathematical one. The mathematical concept is required
by the fact that the formation of intuitions into legitimate
and socially articulated symbol systems is a process which
has many stages. It is only in modern industrial society,
with its patterns of cultural pluralism and rapid
technological change, that we are faced with social systems
that embody various stages of this process. Thinking
about the relationship between intuitions of value and the
formation of symbols in this manner enables us to see that
the distinction between youth as a cultural system and
youth as a mere social group is a false dichotomy. The
change in rhetoric from speaking of culture-versus-social-
group to speaking of half-culture has the potential ability
to shed light on some adolescent behavior problems which have
not heretofore found agreed-upon solutions among social
scientists.

The half-culture of American youth is, therefore, a
meaning system which is only partly articulated. It
expresses deep convictions about some important issues,
and lays down rules and regulations for behavior which are

widely accepted within the age group. The foundation for such formulations exists in group experiences which fortify personal feelings and intuitions. Because of their raw power, these feelings and intuitions have considerable impact on behavior, even in the absence of fully articulated symbols. The behavior which conforms to the dictates of the youthful half-culture leads to a sense of personal honor rather than to a sense of shame.

### The Social Supports of Youthful Half-Culture

Youthful half-culture in America emerges from the common condition of subordination and marginality experienced by all American adolescents. However, this common condition is experienced differently by different segments of American youth, and so youthful half-culture takes a variety of concrete forms. For example, the children of traditional wealth do not have the same complaints and convictions as the children of poor Blacks. But, because of the homogeneity of the situation of youth in America, there are continuities even among the many diverse concrete forms of youthful subcultures. One expression of these continuities is that vandalism occurs in the high schools of wealthy suburbs as well as in those of the inner city.

American youth experience subordination and marginality (a) in being excluded from full participation in the labor

force, (b) in the legal classification as minors, which excludes them from free access to adult recreations, and (c) in their statutory and customary obligation to remain in high school and be subject to the authority of teachers and administrators.

This structural position of adolescents is an adjunct of their process of transition. This is the transition which Parsons noted in 1942: from "the family of orientation" to "the occupational world." One focal point of the youthful half-culture is the strain, intrinsic to this transition, of changing the nature of interpersonal relationships from familial, personalistic, and particularistic to formal, instrumental, and universalistic. This is an "objective" strain, contained in social and cultural institutions. It is not, therefore, necessarily a strain conscious or visible to the actors in question. This is one reason the youth culture is a half-culture: one central issue of the social situation is not the object of articulate symbolic focus. However, because of this strain, a considerable portion of adolescents' psychic energy is invested in experiments with, the testing of, rumination about, and judgment of the balance between friendship and intimate relationships on the one hand, and utilitarian instrumental activities and relationships on the other.

## Instrumental Moratorium, Cultural Activity

The definition of this balance in legitimate symbol systems is a fundamental task of culture. The relationship between the feelings of personal worth derived from domestic relationships--family and friendship--and those derived from societal relationships--chiefly work--is an issue which a culture must address successfully to be viable. In societies where this relationship is definitively established, the process of socialization includes chiefly that meditation necessary to internalize the established norms. The literature on youth in America of the 1940s and 1950s concluded that this is the kind of meditation American youth was engaged in. It appeared to be a psychosocial moratorium.

However, because events of recent years have established a variety and pluralism in adults' commitments to the demands of "the occupational system," the meditation of youth has been opened to alternatives. Thus adolescence in America is now a time of instrumental moratorium, but also of cultural activity. The relationship between the personal and domestic sphere of life on the one hand and the occupational and societal aspect of individual connectedness on the other is no longer clearly defined. For this reason youth must pause to contemplate their options at a fundamental

level. It is no longer merely a question of committing oneself to an occupation or role, but of defining the relationship of the self of personal and intimate connectedness with the self of societal connectedness. This is the conclusion of Keniston's analysis of youth's stand on role commitments. This also means that the problem of youth is a fullfledged cultural problem. It is experienced most acutely by adolescents, because they are in the stage of socialization the core of which is the transition from childhood to the occupational system.

In our data from the Youth in Illinois Project we find that youth are in a situation of intense cultural activity.

We must not, however, confuse intense cultural activity with high cultural achievement. Adolescents ask trenchant questions about meaning; they are not necessarily in a position adequately to answer them. Even where their questioning is latent and inarticulate, it is still a powerful force in directing their feelings about the persons and institutions they encounter in everyday life. Moreover, in a culture as individualistic as ours, they are not easily dissuaded from acting upon their intuitions about meaning. Such issues of meaning are organized into a partially legitimatized smybol system we call the half-culture of American youth.

This definition has some specific and serious implications for the problem of high school vandalism. The first, general implication is that the destruction of high school property need not be due to individual craziness, nor to organized conspiracy, but to something else. Acts of vandalism occur because of their inarticulate, socially supported, and partly legitimatized claims to virtue, wisdom, and truth.

## The Variety of Youthful Half-Cultures

When we look at the full range of meanings which youthful half-cultures try to handle, we find that there are three ideal types of these meaning systems. We can call them (1) the socie way of the middle class, (2) the greaser way of the working class, and (3) the way of the freak. These three ideal types show up in ways which differ importantly between the youth of different racial and ethnic groups. They also assume distinctive forms depending on the community. But, as ideal types, they are valid aids to understanding the youth situation in any concrete setting.

The socie cultural style places great value on the skills and behavior which harmonize well with occupations requiring "a good impression," literacy, and mental

proficiency. Thus, socies' dress is patterned after the style of the upper middle class, and their competitions depend much on verbal skills. The greaser cultural style places great value on the skills and behavior which harmonize well with occupations requiring manual skills. Thus greasers' dress is patterned on after the style of skilled manual laborers, and their competitions depend much on physical excellence. Youth of both groups form friendships primarily within their group.

Although both socies and greasers may be highly critical of adults, they accept the validity and importance of their connection to a particular stratum of the occupational world. The freak cultural style is based on a suspension of this acceptance. Freaks place great value on the behavior and skills which demonstrate that suspension of commitment to occupational striving. Thus their dress and behavior emphasize appearance and demeanor unacceptable in the occupational worlds of socies and greasers.

The socie/greaser/freak typology is very helpful for understanding the social organization of the peer group world, and for understanding many of the decisions made by

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adolescents in everyday life. But for understanding
the relatively narrow issue of high school vandalism,
we can use another typology. This is a five-fold
typology based on only one aspect of youth half-cultures:
belief in the legitimacy of adult authority. The types are:
(1) the demonstratively deferential, (2) the quiescent,
(3) the questioning, (4) the truculent, and (5) the militant.

This typology concerns only one aspect of youthful
lifestyle, and can be superimposed over the socie-greaser-
freak typology (if one does not get too literal about it).
The value of the five-fold typology to the present discussion
is that it allows us to make a useful set of hypotheses
about the cuases of high school vandalism.

The first hypothesis is that the values of any
individual teenager tend to range over any three contiguous
styles in the typology. This means that youths are
deferential/quiescent/questioning, quiescent/questioning/
truculent, etc. A second hypothesis is that the distribution
of youth is skewed over these categories, with the mean
in the quiescent. A third is that truculence (youth who
are centrally so, or youth in those moments when they are
temporarily so) accounts for the vast majority of acts of
vandalism on high school property. Finally, we hypothesize

that the social support of vandalism is distributed in a linear fashion from low in category one to high in category five.

Let us describe these five types of youth more fully. Due to complex factors of their experience to date, teenagers come to school with a scalar like or dislike of adult authority. The demonstratively deferential are frequently regular churchgoers, not because they have to, but because they find religion intrinsically meaningful. They vary in intelligence, in style of dress, in social background. They like to participate in activities organized by adults. The quiescent move through youth unobtrusively. They are not joiners, and give no trouble. They do average to excellent work in class. The questioners are outwardly very much like the quiescent, except that they are more aware of the problems of others. They have not yet taken any position, and they see no wisdom in openly confronting authority. The truculent, by contrast, are by tradition or personal disposition more likely to engage in open confrontation. They have no clearly defined justification for their feelings, but they are willing to act. The militant are confirmed in their truculence by an ideology.

As far as the socie-greaser-freak typology is concerned, our field work encountered various combinations. The common condition of youth in economic and political subordination makes possible many mixtures of occupational orientation and feelings about adult authority. The militant socie is an example: this is the straight-looking academic achiever, definitely headed for college, who could spray paint "Off the pigs" on a school building. The deferential freak occurs frequently: denim-clad, with loose, long hair, ex-dope using, Jesus enthusiast. Every other possible combination also exists. Neither socie nor greaser nor freak is limited to one style of thinking and action with regard to adult authority symbols.

### High School: Symbol and Operation

The high school is a symbol as well as an operation. What it does in its day-to-day program is one thing; what it stands for in the minds of its students is another. Adults usually think of high school as a pragmatic program for acquiring the skills necessary for economic success and the social habits of mature citizenship. In the minds of the students, high school certainly has its instrumental side, but it is also a symbol of adult, civil authority, power, and control.

Some high schools succeed in presenting themselves as familial communities in which the quality of personal

relationships between adults and adolescents is as
important as the instrumental effectiveness of role
relationships between teachers and students. These
are usually the smaller private schools which charge
tuition. However, the vast majority of American high
schools do not do this. They are civil institutions
designed to serve purely instrumental purposes. The
interactions between staff and pupils are based primarily
on clear role definitions. The quality of personal
relationships between particular staff members and
particular students is expected to conform to the minimum
standards of politeness and decency, but instrumental
effectiveness overshadows interpersonal solidarity.

Furthermore, to the extent that school personnel assume
the maturity of the culture which determines their activities,
they are not readily open to review issues of meaning. Their
focus is pragmatic.

The staff of a high school has control over its
students. It is also true that adult individuals and groups
have control over the school premises. What to build and
how to build it, when the buildings will be open or closed,
what activities will be permitted in them, maintenance,
and so forth--all of these rights and responsibilities fall
elsewhere than on the students in the school. Thus, there

are manifold grounds for high school students to doubt that the facilities they use belong to them. Rather, they belong to some civil entity: state, town, community, etc.

Thus the treatment of high school property can very easily become a focal point for youthful sentiments about their relationship to the civic whole. If we recognize the potential for alienation as inherent to the status of adolescents, we have our first basis for considering vandalism a logical outcome of the relationship between the half-culture of youth and the socialization agencies of society.

### The Legitimization of Discontent

Dissent is an articulate cognitive stance in disagreement with established norms. Discontent, however, is an inarticulate feeling. In the half-culture of American youth, there is some legitimization of dissent, but this is not nearly so widespread as the legitimization of discontent. We do not need a catalogue of specific complaints to understand the general support in the half-cultures of youth for gestures which express feelings toward high school ranging from mere unconcern to positive hostility. Dissent is not necessary for the performance of vandalism; disconcent is sufficient. In fact, the inarticulateness of discontent makes it a more likely basis of vandalism

than dissent. Dissent leads more easily to organized
forms of protest. The vandalism we are witnessing today
is characteristically disorganized.

### The Distribution of Vandalism

The high schools which suffer least from vandalism
appear to be the smaller, private, expensive schools which
provide academic training to the children of the affluent.
The high schools of small towns or communities which have
preserved a familial atmosphere are also comparatively
safe. But even here, our ethnographic data show that the
children of a town's "better families" no longer protect
the school as well as they used to from acts of vandalism.

In both of these cases, what protects school property
from vandalism is the connection of the students to the
school, which is fostered by the connection of the students'
parents to the school. In the small town the parents'
membership in the local community contributes to their
sense of control over the school. In private schools,
parents' monetary investment often brings with it a sense
of personal investment. Where parents are welcome and
frequent visitors and advisors in a private schools,
students can feel that the school is an extension of the
family. This community solidarity or direct family in-
vestment constructs a social bond between domestic

solidarities and values and the educational institution.

When we look at the large, complex school systems
of big cities, we find greater geographic mobility of
families and the phenomenon of large-scale, impersonal
buraucracies. Each of these phenomena, in its own way,
breaks the personal connection between parents and school.
In addition, urban high schools are often integral parts
of a civic whole which has failed to integrate and
satisfy the needs of large segments of its population.
High schools are only one vulnerable target for the
anger of children of excluded minorities.

### The Meanings of Vandalism

The high cost of vandalism is the result of many
relatively small acts of destruction which accumulate
over time to create severe damage to high school property.
Although arson and even bombings do occur, they are rare
and account for a small percentage of the total dollar cost
of vandalism. What adds up to the immense cost we are
speaking of is a graffito here, a smashed window there,
now a forced lock, now a broken chair, and so forth.

Given that the high school symbolizes adult control
of adolescent life, that there is a pervasive undercurrent
of discontent, and that there is widespread distribution

of truculence, we can see that there are different motives for these small acts of vandalism.

Some destruction occurs by accident or misguided exuberance. A playful shove, an angry argument, bodies move, something gets broken. This happens even in homes. But in school, it all belongs to the government, money is an issue, and nobody wants to get "caught."

Another motive is selective carelessness. If the phenomenon of littering were investigated carefully, one causative factor would surely be subliminal alienation. Teenagers do not throw beer cans on the kitchen floor of their own homes. They do not put out cigarettes on the top of their family television set. But, if they dislike high school and can't get out of it, they have many opportunities for extending the boundaries of "normal wear and tear."

"Narcissistic projection" is another motive. Students have carved their initials on their desks since they've had them. Former generations lacked our indelible felt-tipped pens and our spray paint. But in an institution where individuals feel anonymous and lost, there are many other ways to make your mark on the institution, thereby going down in history and gaining the momentary respect of fellow suffers. This can account for a lot of property

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damage. They do not require conspiracy, or even a lot
of thought. What they do require is a half-culture which
gives tacit approval before, during, and after the fact.

If we add to these less articulated motives the
organized truculence of some youth gangs, ideological
protest, and property-oriented terrorism, we have a full
range of motivations for vandalism. But these last three
phenomena are much less important than those mentioned
previously. This is only our impression and must be
subjected to empirical verification. However, we feel they
account for only a small percentage of the current
destruction of high school property.

Furthermore, these last three phenomena cannot
exist isolated from the ones mentioned earlier, but those
others can exist in isolation from these. This is because
extreme or organized forms of truculence are extensions
of the central phenomenon: the passive and inarticulate
forms of discontent permitted by the intuitions and
feelings which are the basis of the half-culture of youth.
Without this symbolic matrix of uncertainty and exploration,
the truculent expressions of alienation would have no
social support at all. It is the case of the bandits
being sheltered by the ethos of the poor and disen-
franchised.

## Responses to Vandalism

Four models for responses to high school vandalism
seem to address themselves to real facets of the situation.

### Dominance/Antagonism

One model is the dominance/antagonism model, currently
being used in many institutions and counterinsurgency
military operations. This involves, for example, electronic.
surveillance, police presence, indestructible partitions,
undercover agents, and informers. Sensitive officials
already recognize that the use of these techniques turns
schools into jails or armed camps. These are, however,
first attempts by amateurs in the fields of public safety
and military tactics. It is clearly possible for such
techniques to move away from reliance on such crude
technology and to develop strategies which draw on more
sophisticated techniques of warfare.

There is, for example, the technique of blandishment
and deceit. The scenario for this is to call for open
discussion of the situation, get the enemy to reveal them-
selves, and then punish severly. A less extreme program
would be the detection and isolation of the truculent and
militant segments of schools by the use of special programs
or special schools: maximum security institutions. There
are any number of rationalizations for the use of such
procedures. When the problem is seen purely as a behavioral

one, and the correct relationship between school and students is seen as one of dominance in the face of antagonistic interests, such techniques are not unthinkable.

Therefore, the main problem with using the techniques of penology and warfare is not a failure of the technology or the limited ingenuity of authorities. If officials really set their minds to it, they have the resources and the skills to win this war. Rather, the problem is in defining the situation in terms of dominance and antagonistic interests. How can any society make war upon its own children?

## Public Relations

The logic of a public relations model is that most vandalism is symbolic rather than pragmatic in nature, and that, therefore, the response to vandalism should be to manipulate symbols. A public relations campaign would address the symbolic deficiencies of the high school. One tactic might be to change the vague definition of the high school as part of the civic whole and to present its real services to the students and to the local community. It would be presented symbolically more as a local, community institution, closer to its students, and less as an impersonal extension of distant powers. There are doubtless

many other tactics which could be used according to this model. To the extent that a high school or a high school system is the innocent victim of unjustified symbolic connections, a skillful ad campaign could prove helpful.

There are two important difficulties with this approach. One is that high school students are acutely able to recognize symbolic glibness. When this is coupled with the frequently naive views of administrators and faculty toward their own institutions, the possibility of failure to do the job insightfully becomes very real. The second major problem is that in many cases the adolescent and parental diagnosis of the high school's failings is painfully accurate. In those cases--where the school is oppressive, unprofessional, discriminating, self-righteous, etc.-- even the best of public relations campaigns will fall flat.

## The Student Connection:  Negotiation

The peculiar nature of the half-culture of youth poses serious problems for any negotiation model based on traditional images of political process or labor contract negotiation. The central problem is the asymmetric articulation of the positions to be negotiated.

Adults have a culture; adolescents have a half-culture. Teenagers have strong feelings and intuitions about their

situation, but, in their condition of marginality and subordination, they lack the material and symbolic resources adults have for articulating and defending their position. Secondly, the adults involved in high schools are organized, whereas the students are disorganized. Thirdly, adults in high schools have, by statute, custom, and tradition, dominative power. High school students have no power at all.

Because of this total asymmetry in the positions of the two parties presumed to have an interest in the problem, negotiations cannot follow any traditional two-party model or third-party arbitration model. In the first place, students cannot easily come to the bargaining table with defensible, articulated demands. Secondly, there is at present no solidarity of support for student demands. The variety of youthful half-cultures and the disorganization of youth stand in the way of this. Thirdly, if negotiations break down, the inequality of power places student leaders in an extremely vulnerable position. In order for high school students to take part in progressive negotiation about the perservation of these institutions, they must have power, solidarity, and cultural assistance.

## The Parental Connection: Community Process

We noted earlier that those high schools which have created a familial atmosphere and which operate with the

the serious investment and close concern of parents seem to be relatively free of vandalism. We also noted that such institutions are rare. One logical implication of this observation is that a strong parental connection can result in decreased vandalism.

However, a strong parental connection is a social relationship which depends on a fine web of informal interactions taking place over long periods of time. It is also a political relationship between civil authorities and local population groups. High schools which enjoy good social and political relationships with their local communities are, in fact, open and accessible to parents. In school districts encompassing greatly diverse economic and ethnic groups, with high rates of geographic mobility, and enmeshed in a large bureaucracy, this openness and accessibility is notoriously difficult to achieve. In many cases it appears to require a complete reorganization of the social and political relationships between community and school.

The fact that such reorganization may be necessary to effect a substantial decrease in high school vandalism is not surprising. For, if vandalism is related to the combination of youth's social and political marginality on the one hand and to the half-formed nature of youth culture on the other, then it must be construed as a natural

result of the lopsided distribution of power in the community/school complex. The "naturalness" of vandalism is basic to the hypotheses advanced in this paper. It is a theory which must yet be tested empirically, but our data on the overall situation of youth convinces us that it must be taken seriously. Both the family and the school are institutions of great importance to the socialization of youth. Thus, the triangular nature of the linkages among family, school, and teenagers has to be the focal point for analysis and reform.

## Conclusion

An empirical investigation into the sources of vandalism on high school property would begin with a survey of the distribution of the phenomenon in high schools in different settings. This should lead to an analysis of the girevance basis for this symbolic action. This in turn should lead to an understanding of the conflicts which may divide the high school—its personnel, policies, and programs—from its teenaged clients and their families. This set of conflicts could be presented in a set of issues which comprise an alienation profile of the high schools in question. The alienation profile could give a clue to the relative usefulness of the four models for responding to vandalism.

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