BY JEROME BEKER

Male Adolescent Inmates' Perceptions of Helping Persons

Much attention has recently been given to "informal" inmate peer groups and to their presumably overwhelming negative influence on institutionalized youth. One result has been an implicit or explicit de-emphasis of the potential impact and importance of staff personnel. The more formal aspects of rehabilitation programs, however, lean heavily on the work of a variety of professional and "nonprofessional" staff members, including administrators, clinicians, child care workers or cottage parents, recreation leaders, work project supervisors, and others. Since the rehabilitative functions of most of these people involve direct relationships with youth in custody, it seems apparent that their effectiveness is mediated by the ways in which inmates perceive them. The study reported here was undertaken in an effort to explore relationships between such perceptions and various staff positions.

It has been frequently reported and occasionally documented that the greatest impact on institutionalized young people (or adults) may often result from their relationships with the nonprofessional personnel, who are only informally and indirectly involved in the treatment program. They may be kitchen workers, work supervisors, maintenance employees, or others in analogous positions. Child care workers or cottage parents, while often perceived as more closely related to the treatment program, are typically considered in the nonprofessional category, usually bringing with them little general education or specific job training. The apparent impact of such people is frequently attributed to the fact that they tend to come from the same subcultural reference groups as do most of the inmates of such institutions, thus sharing similar values, goals, and

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1 For example, see Howard W. Polsky, Cottage Six—The Social System of Delinquent Boys in Residential Treatment (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1962).
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orientations. Therefore, they can perhaps communicate and identify more easily and fully with most inmates than can the professionally trained, middle-class teaching and treatment personnel.

Another source of the apparent potency of nonprofessionals in their work with inmates may lie in the fact that their contacts tend to be in situations in which staff member and inmate are working together toward a goal that is somewhat external and thus nontreating to the inmate involved, such as cleaning the cottage, painting the administration building, playing softball. The focus is on the goal rather than on the relationship or the youth himself. On the other hand, professional treatment and teaching personnel may appear more frequently to inmates as working "on" than "with" them. This paper is an attempt to lay the groundwork for more systematic study of such phenomena by exploring how adolescent inmates do, in fact, feel about the institutional staff members with whom they have close contact. 4

The question has been approached through inmates' perceptions of the potentials of the various adults around them for meeting particular personality "needs" selected from those proposed by Murray, namely, succorance, deference, achievement-recognition, and playmirth. 5

These needs were selected not only because they seem particularly relevant, but because they have been operationalized in the form of verbal stimuli for young people by Gardner and Thompson. 6 Inmate perceptions of "need-meeting potential" are presented for each need, according to staff role position (e.g., caseworkers). In addition, attention is given to marked differences in perceptions of individuals within the same staff category.

The study was undertaken in 1962 at Berkshire Farm for Boys, a private residential treatment institution with a capacity of 145 delinquent adolescent boys. Intake is selective, reflecting largely the requirements of the open setting. The population is interracial, interdenominational, and primarily of the lower socioeconomic class. Boys are typically referred by court-related agencies and represent both urban and rural areas of several northeastern states. The institution provides a variety of services, including intensive casework and a full school program; it employs eight caseworkers, a child psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, a chaplain, and other professionals on a full-time basis.

**METHOD**

**Subjects.** One hundred inmates, twenty from each of the five cottages, were randomly selected as subjects from among all the boys who had been in residence at the institution for longer than three months but less than eighteen months. The in-residence minimum was established in an effort to ensure that all subjects had had time to establish a fairly broad range of relationships (or familiarity, at the very least) with the institution's staff members. The few boys whose period of institutionalization exceeded eighteen months were excluded because they tended to represent unusual, special circumstances, and because they had been exposed to many changes in the staff members with whom

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4 Korn and McCorkle point out that inmate contact with nonprofessionals tends to be in situations for which new role behavior must be learned in the course of rehabilitation. This additional possible source of the apparent potency of nonprofessional personnel is, however, peripheral to the present study. See R. R. Korn and L. W. Mc- McCorkle, *Criminology and Penology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1959).

5 It should be noted that the possible relationships between inmates' perceptions and successful rehabilitation comprise a separate issue. For Murray's proposal of personality "needs" see H. A. Murray, *Explorations in Personality: A Clinical and Experimental Study of Fifty Men of College Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

they had contact. Only one boy selected refused to participate; another boy was randomly selected from his cottage to take his place.

Procedure. Subjects were tested individually by one of five examiners, among whom were three outsiders unknown to the boys and two members of the research staff. Each boy was assured of the confidentiality of his responses before being given ten 3 x 5-inch index cards on which were typed staff members' names, one per card. Included were the names of his cottage mother, cottage father, cottage relief counselor, cottage night supervisor, caseworker, regular teachers (usually two), and regular work supervisor (if the boy held a "job" in the institution). Thus, each boy had seven (occasionally six or eight) predetermined individuals to rank. In addition, each was asked to name the three (or two or four) other staff members he knew best—irrespective of whether he liked them or not—bringing to ten the total number of cards for each boy. A minimally adapted version of the Gardner and Thompson operational description of one of the "needs" was then read to the subject, who was asked to give the examiner the card containing the name of the person "who fits this best of all from the ten cards you have." 7 Successive choices were made in the same way until all cards were ranked for that particular need. Scores were recorded by the examiner, and the cards were then shuffled and returned to the subject to be ranked in the same manner for each of the other needs.

Analysis. "Scores" for the four needs are presented and discussed as average ranks achieved by particular staff groups or individuals. 8 In view of the exploratory nature of the study, no explicit attempt has been made to generalize findings through statistical analysis or otherwise, although the group involved is not believed to be systematically atypical of institutionalized delinquent boys. 9 Only replication in other settings, of course, can more firmly establish the extent to which generalization would be valid. It should also be noted that a degree of precision may have been sacrificed by the heavy reliance placed on impressions gleaned from the data and by the ranking technique, which forced subjects to respond in relative terms among the ten choices available rather than according to any absolute criterion. For example, subjects could not reject all asked to make or do something that a large number of people, both adults and your friends, will see.

4. Need playmirth. "Suppose you are going to some kind of party. If you can be there with certain people you feel sure that you will have a good time and lots of fun."

8 Of course, this means that low numbers designate high ranks and the reverse, i.e., a rank of "1" indicates that the person involved was ranked in "first place" by that particular respondent. The use of average ranks precludes the identification of individual inmate-staff relationships that may be particularly meaningful; the present study is concerned with role relationships rather than individual ones.

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Table 1. Mean Rankings of Major Staff Groups on Four Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of rankings*</th>
<th>Succorance</th>
<th>Achievement-recognition</th>
<th>Deference</th>
<th>Playmirth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caseworkers</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage fathers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage mothers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage relief counselors</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage night supervisors</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation leaders</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work supervisors</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* More than 100 rankings were obtained for staff categories in which some subjects rated more than one person. Only 94 boys rated a night supervisor because the other six were not sure who their night supervisor was. The 64 “missing” rankings were scattered among 25 administrative and other staff members, all selected among subjects’ “free choices.”

adults as having need-meeting potential for them except by refusing to participate at all. It was anticipated that this approach would yield potentially richer data and more provocative “leads” for further research.

Table 1 summarizes the mean rankings of each major staff group on each of the four needs. It seems evident that subjects were able to differentiate with some consistency among the needs included, at least when rating those staff members with whom they had fairly close and regular contact. The one major exception was the cottage night supervisor position, which received generally low and virtually equivalent average rankings on all needs. Night supervisors, it should be noted, have little opportunity to establish relationships with boys, since their duty hours begin around bedtime and end when the boys arise in the morning. What contact exists usually involves bedtime discipline, handling the few boys who awaken during the night, or getting the boys up in the morning.

NEED SUCCORANCE

Attention is directed first to succorance, presumably of central importance in a treatment-oriented setting. Among the four needs studied, succorance seems theoretically most fundamental to the prescribed function of the caseworker or other treatment agent. Therefore, it seems appropriate to examine what the youths themselves report when asked to rank the significant adults in their institutional lives according to the adult’s need-meeting potential in this area.

In marked contrast to their rankings on the other needs, caseworkers had a consistently high average ranking on need succorance (see Table 1). This suggests that, at least in the institution studied, inmates can and do differentiate the prescribed functions of clinical personnel and, perhaps, use clinical services as intended. While it seems equally evident that caseworkers are not perceived to be especially helpful as “ego ideals” or in other ways (as discussed later), the findings suggest that caseworkers may be fulfilling a need that has been overlooked by those who would depend on the milieu alone to effect rehabilitation. Clearly, further exploration to delineate the specific impact potential of various types of personnel is needed.

While the influence of the institutional milieu and the personnel who are an integral part of it should not be underestimated, neither should the potential contributions of clinical personnel using more formal and traditional methods of treatment.

It is noteworthy that, with one exception, each caseworker’s average ranking for APRIL 1965
need succorance was between 2.3 and 3.3. The seventh caseworker's average was 4.0. Thus, the over-all results cannot be attributed to the especially potent influence of one or a few particularly skillful individuals. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the mean scores on need succorance for four of the five male caseworkers were between 2.3 and 2.5. The means for the two women were 3.1 and 4.0, suggesting that further exploration of the relative effectiveness of male and female caseworkers with male juvenile delinquents should be undertaken. Butttressed by the rankings of cottage mothers, this finding is consistent with theoretical expectations regarding the difficulty of many delinquents in relating to—and accepting help from—the perceived "weaker" (i.e., less "tough") sex. The fifth male caseworker, a rather quiet and passive individual, received a mean ranking of 3.3 on this variable.

The cottage father position was ranked next highest to that of the caseworker on need succorance and was, indeed, the only other position to achieve a mean ranking "better" than 5.0. An examination of these results by cottage is presented in Table 2. It seems evident, first, that cottage fathers were clearly and consensually perceived by their groups as sources of "succorance" (in Cottages 1, 3, and 5) or not (in Cottages 2 and 4).

The primary perceived sources of succorance having been isolated as the caseworkers and three cottage fathers, the question emerges as to the relationship between the help provided by each: Do youths who perceive their cottage fathers as effective sources of succorance express less need for their caseworkers in this area? Is the converse also true? Having the need met more fully within day-to-day "milieu living," do they depend less on the relatively external caseworker established in the formal system to meet this need? A slight tendency in this direction may be built into the project because of the rank-order method used in data-gathering, since subjects are forced to rate others lower if they rate any particular adult higher; they cannot give two individuals a rating of "one."

Despite any such intrinsic bias, however, the data in Table 2 do not bear out the hypothesis implied above. A pattern consistent with such reciprocity appears in Cottages 2, 3, and 5 but not in the other two. These findings seem to imply that succorance is rather consistently perceived, at least by these adolescents, as flowing from particular kinds of people and only partly because of their formal positions. Cottage mothers were not consistently perceived as effective sources of succorance in any of the cottages; their mean rankings ranged from 4.4 to 7.3. As with the caseworkers, these findings raise questions about the relative effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of female adults working with male adolescent delinquents.

Apparently caseworkers, especially males, tend to be perceived as effective sources of succorance, as do some cottage fathers (however, other cottage fathers are consistently and rather markedly rejected). Perhaps trust (in the sense of confidentiality) is involved here, or the delinquent's perception of these "helping persons" as adults who can be used to help one circumvent the demands of the formal system. Teachers, recreation leaders, relief counselors, work supervisors, and others all attained composite ratings near the average on need succorance. While some of these individuals were perceived as helpful by a few (and some by many) youngsters, they showed no consistently high or low rank-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Mean Rankings of Caseworkers and Cottage Fathers on Need Succorance, by Cottage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cottage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ing by role position, such as has been reported for some of their colleagues.

Findings that should be explored more deeply include the perceptions of female staff and reasons for the wide but consistent disparities among ratings of cottage fathers. Are personality factors and, in particular, varying levels of "emotional availability" involved in the latter? Different perceptions of their proper functions by cottage fathers themselves? Differences in cottage subcultures and social structures? Such factors as these should be explored and their impact and interaction delineated. Finally, it should be determined what a high or a low ranking on need succorance and other needs may mean in terms of a staff member's "rehabilitation impact." A relationship perceived by a boy as helpful may be one that is helping him to accept and internalize acceptable standards and an enhanced sense of self-worth. It may also be one that is helping him to avoid facing the social and personal implications of his behavior, to circumvent "legitimate means," and to become a less feeling, "more effective" delinquent.10

NEED ACHIEVEMENT-RECOGNITION

Adolescent feelings of self-worth, particularly if they are to be developed through legitimate means, seem to be fostered by the achievement of legitimate ends, which motivate new and larger forward steps. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that such accomplishments will have meaning to lower-class adolescents only if they are concrete and tangible rather than verbal and symbolic. Concrete and tangible life achievement—or failure—is a major content element on which the casework, especially with lower-class clients, may focus. This is not to de-emphasize the importance of treatment or the caseworker-client relationship. Rather, it is a reflection of the central importance of legitimate achievement to the reorientation of the values and behavior of delinquent boys. In this context, it should be of interest to know which staff members the institutionalized adolescent boy tends to perceive as potentially helpful in his efforts toward tangible, visible achievement.

The data indicate that caseworkers as a group fared more poorly in this area than on any of the other needs studied—more poorly, in fact, than did any other group except the night cottage supervisors and the cottage mothers. While caseworkers are apparently perceived as able to provide succorance, they are seen as relatively ineffective when assistance with a concrete project is sought. This tendency was consistent among all seven caseworkers, the range in mean rankings being from 5.6 to 7.4 with, again, the two female caseworkers in fifth and seventh positions. These data are not surprising, since the three groups with lowest scores are the groups with which inmates have least "achievement-oriented" contact. However, the finding may have implications for community treatment if an "achievement model" is important in rehabilitation, since clinicians seem generally ill equipped either by role or background to meet this need.

The recreation staff was perceived as most effective in this area, apparently reflecting the boys' interest in sports and their use of sports as an achievement vehicle as well as the general popularity of the recreation personnel and the relatively non-disciplinary requirements of their role. It should be noted that recreation workers were not included among the "forced choice" categories and might be expected to show unduly high rankings because of their voluntary selection. This was not the case, however, for need succorance, for which their rankings were no better than average. Further, the apparent free choice of recreation personnel may have been

more dictated than appears on the surface because a given number of free choices was required, and most of the other staff categories with which boys have close contact had been included among the forced choices (e.g., cottage parents, caseworkers, and the like). Although one especially popular recreation worker had a marked influence on the average score, all three individuals in this category received mean rankings of 4.5 or better on need achievement-recognition.

The average rankings of cottage fathers, work supervisors, cottage relief counselors, and schoolteachers on need achievement-recognition followed those of the recreation staff in that order, all within a rather narrow range. Some extreme individual differences within these groups, however, were noted. Females, again, tended to have lower rankings. Among teachers, the tendency was clearly for higher rankings to be given to vocational and manual arts teachers and lower rankings to academic teachers. It is impossible to know how much this was owing to the teachers themselves, the subject matter, and the fact that vocational subjects (and, therefore, teachers) were usually elective rather than assigned. The same division among average rankings of cottage fathers appeared as has been reported for need succorance, although there were less pronounced differences between the rankings of the three who were ranked as more effective and those of their colleagues.

NEED DEFERENCE

Here the prime concern is with adults as objects of admiration and imitation rather than as necessarily helpful in tangible achievement. They might be referred to as ego ideals, role models, or identification objects. In this area most of all, perhaps, it would be hypothesized on a "commonsense" basis that the lower-class, nonprofessional worker would tend to be ranked above such professionals as caseworkers and teachers, by the boys. The reverse finding would suggest that a closer look be given to such factors as the boys' aspirations and goals.

An examination of Table 1 indicates that not a great deal of systematic differentiation occurred in either direction. At least in part, this could be owing to the failure of some of the subjects to understand the question and/or a tendency for the question to be interpreted in different ways by different boys. As on all needs studied, the night supervisors tended to be ranked last. As would be expected on an item dealing with identification, the cottage mothers also tended to receive low rankings. All other mean rankings by position can be characterized as falling in the middle range with little differentiation, although there was a tendency for recreation workers and cottage fathers to be ranked near the top and for work supervisors and cottage relief counselors to be ranked nearer the bottom. The professionals—teachers and caseworkers—were between, leaving unresolved the issue posed at the beginning of this section.

A closer look at the data reveals a wide variation among individual staff members in their mean rankings on need deference, suggesting that the subjects did understand the question and responded accordingly. For example, caseworkers' mean rankings ranged from 3.6 to 7.3, with the two females and the seemingly passive male mentioned previously at the bottom. This compares with ranges for the same seven caseworkers of 2.3 to 4.0 on need succorance, 5.6 to 7.4 on need achievement-recognition, and 5.0 to 7.2 on need playmirth. Wide—although not quite so dramatic—ranges were also noted among teachers and cottage fathers. It might be hypothesized from these findings that the subjects tended to give relatively greater weight to individual personalities in identifying their ego ideals than when other needs, presumably less central, were involved. These findings also suggest that
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there may be greater consistency among the subjects in their selection of individuals as ego ideals.

NEED PLAYMIRTH

In this area perhaps more than in the other three, the available choices may have seemed artificial to many of the subjects. It seems likely that few would voluntarily have chosen adults rather than peers to go to a party or to have fun with. The boundaries of the present study, however, limited subjects' choices to the ten institutional staff members whom they presumably knew best.11

Among these, as might have been predicted from data discussed previously as well as from the role positions involved, the recreation workers achieved the highest mean rankings on playmirth. More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that cottage relief counselors were ranked next highest in contrast to their generally mediocre rankings for the other three needs. Their average was influenced by particularly high mean rankings achieved by three of the relief counselors (see Table 3).12 This may reflect a "loosening up" or relative relaxation in cottage life and routines on days when the regular cottage parents are off duty. It seems significant that the boys were able to differentiate so clearly the abilities of relief counselors in three cottages to meet succorance, achievement-recognition, and deference needs from the same counselors' potential as individuals with whom they could have fun. Also interesting is the fact that the two relief counselors who achieved only mediocre rankings on playmirth were the oldest and tended to be ranked at similar levels or even "better" on the other needs. Perhaps these two functioned more like the regular cottage parents.

Cottage fathers ranked next, followed by a cluster of virtually equivalent mean rankings around 6.0 for teachers, caseworkers, work supervisors, and cottage mothers. Again, and perhaps because of the roles they performed, the night supervisors clearly tended to be ranked last. In general, it seems that those staff members with whom the boys actually played were perceived as the most fun to be with, although there were individual exceptions in both directions. Perhaps this was the clearest and most concrete of the needs studied and, therefore, the easiest for most subjects to evaluate according to staff role positions.

The need playmirth findings may have broad implications for residential treatment of delinquents, since this area relates most closely to one of the few apparent "common denominators" that seem to characterize most kinds of delinquents and most institutionalized youth. Almost characteristically, it seems, these young people appear apathetic, anomic, "joyless." Their participation, even in such exciting events as sports, often appears halfhearted and unenthusiastic; this may be the easiest way for the casual observer to differentiate an informal baseball game involving nondelinquent, noninstitutionalized youngsters from one being played in an institution for delinquents. In short, it appears that most institutionalized delinquents tend not to show spontaneity or to "have fun" in the

### Table 3. Rankings of Cottage Relief Counselors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Cottage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Succorance</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement-recognition</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playmirth</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 A related study with provision for ranking selected peers along with staff members might provide useful insights into differential perceptions by boys of the need-meeting potential of peers and staff members for particular needs and might lead to a clarification of the significance of the "inmate system."

12 These three served Cottages 1, 2, and 3, while the three cottage fathers discussed above as achieving higher rankings were those in Cottages 1, 3, and 5; consequently, no systematic relationship should be inferred.
way that other youngsters often do. They may not know how to “have fun” or have much motivation to learn.

Given such a deficit—and institutional staffs are not immune to this dull “joylessness” either—it would seem that staff members whose direct responsibilities are in the “fun” area have an especially important role in the rehabilitation process. Beyond being freed through therapy, beyond being given feelings of competence and security through the whole range of institutional life, adolescent inmates may frequently need help in simply learning how to have fun and to feel and express joy. Perhaps this weakness has contributed much to the apparent impotence, despite varied and concentrated rehabilitation services, of most residential treatment institutions for delinquents. Therefore, a more careful exploration of the rehabilitation potential of both individual staff members and staff roles perceived by inmates as preferred to “have fun with” might contribute significantly to the effectiveness of residential treatment programs.

**SUMMARY**

Male adolescent inmates at a treatment-oriented correctional institution were asked to rank specific staff members on their ability to help meet four of the youngsters' personality “needs.” The results are presented with emphasis on the significance of formally prescribed staff-role positions. Among the clearest conclusions are (1) the apparent ability of caseworkers to establish relationships with delinquent adolescent boys that the latter perceive as helpful and (2) the fact that delinquent adolescent boys seem generally able to establish closer relationships with male rather than female staff members, both caseworkers and cottage parents. Other implications for residential treatment are proposed. Further study should be undertaken to clarify the “need-meeting potential” of various kinds of institutional staff members and the relationship of such factors to rehabilitation.