

# THEORY AND TECHNIQUES FOR A THERAPEUTIC MILIEU

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The "therapeutic milieu" of the title is Lakeside Center, a short-term residential treatment center for delinquent and unmanageable boys, 16 to 20 years old. With two-and-a-half years of experience behind us, and encouraging results (7), we have begun to look at contemporary psychological theories to gain a better understanding of our actual rehabilitative practices. We wanted to know what we, the staff, are doing; how the boys respond; what principles of human nature are involved; and how these fit into an over-all theory and practice.

In this quest we have become acquainted with Adler's Individual Psychology and have found it very suitable for explaining and supporting what we have been doing, and for suggesting additional procedures. We also learned that Individual Psychology had previously been applied to correctional residential work by Ernst Papanek (5, 6). The present paper attempts to examine our activities in this light.

## THE LAKESIDE PROGRAM

Lakeside can accommodate a maximum of 20 boys at a time. Sentenced for a minimum of 3, to a maximum of 6 months by the juvenile court of the State of Vermont as a condition of probation or as a social welfare commitment, they stay an average of 4 months. Psychotic, homosexual, or retarded boys are not accepted.

There are no physical restraints; the entrance to and exit from Lakeside are never locked. The boys spend 40 hours a week on work assignments, at vigorous outdoor occupations, not made work, under the supervision of the Vermont Department of Forests and Parks. The work program provides the boys an opportunity to interact in moving toward common goals. Conflict and delinquent behavior which may arise at work are brought up in the meetings which are held each evening and thus become the focus for social learning.

The boys are paid for their labor at the rate of one dollar a day, and are given a period of unsupervised shopping each Friday evening

when they can spend their earnings as they wish. Responsibility for housekeeping within Lakeside is on a rotating basis.

The psychotherapeutic aspects of the program have been based originally simply on a belief in the importance of interpersonal relations and the beneficial influence of peer pressure. These are the ingredients of our intensive group therapy with a counselor, in which every boy participates for 90 minutes every evening from Sunday through Friday. Since our goal is to modify delinquent behavior, it is precisely such present behavior on which we focus our efforts during these meetings, rather than on possible "underlying" aspects in the past, or on "deeper" levels.

Upon arrival at Lakeside a boy is assigned to the newer of two therapy groups, and remains with his group until its members complete the program and it is disbanded. When a boy feels he has changed sufficiently to merit his final leave, he requests it of his group. Thus, he may leave Lakeside at any time after the minimum stay of 3 months, provided he can prove to his peers that he has significantly changed his attitudes and behavior. All decisions of the group must be unanimous. The superintendent and staff maintain the right of veto, but it is rarely required. A boy so maladaptive as to be unsuitable for a group experience may upon the unanimous vote of his group be returned to court, or "shipped out," at any time. After this he cannot return to Lakeside.

The environment is structured so that most of the pressure on a boy to change comes from the consequences of his behavior, including the reactions of the other boys. There is a minimum of influence from adults. Thus there are no set rules at Lakeside—such as dress or hair-style regulations—other than those established by the boys themselves. New boys are introduced to the program by current residents, not by a staff member. An unwritten tradition of rules has been established which is modified slightly by each succeeding group. Punishment (withholding pay for work done, denial of furloughs, additional work details) can be meted out by either the staff or the group, but in fact is almost always done by the group. As to rewards, a boy may request from, and be granted by his group two week-end furloughs in recognition of significant change. On his return he reports these furloughs in great detail to his group. The furlough becomes not only a trial situation for the boy, but is also a test of the group's judgment and responsibility.

Of the 80 boys admitted to Lakeside during the first two years,

62 completed the program, and of these, 49, i.e. 79%, had not been returned to court up to the time of writing (7).

#### THEORETICAL SUPPORTS

##### *Social Embeddedness and Social Interest*

From the foregoing description of our program it will have become evident that we would find the emphasis of Individual Psychology on social factors immediately congenial. Adler fully appreciated the extent of the transactions and the interdependence between humans. This led to his concept of aptitude for social interest, i.e., for empathizing with, being interested in, and cooperating with one's fellow man. Adler regarded each individual as "embedded" in a larger whole and refused "to recognize and examine an isolated human being" (1, p. 126). He assumed in social interest an aptitude for meeting this situation in an active way. At Lakeside we had been operating with the tacit assumption of such an aptitude, without, however, having had a term for it.

The environment and program at Lakeside are so structured as to give each boy a maximum experience of his connection with the larger group, or "society." We place strong emphasis on the group's cohesive structure as a means of developing social interest, mutual help and responsibility. This cohesion is maintained by insisting on shared agreement as to the standards that will regulate the behavior of each individual within the group, as well as of the group itself. At every turn the group functions to develop the fragile social interest of each of its members. As Adler maintained that "self-boundedness is the central point of attack of Individual Psychology" (1, p. 112), so self-boundedness is also the first problem for us to overcome at Lakeside.

We find upon their admission that these are deprived youngsters whose innate potential for social living had never been cultivated within their families or society. This we see, for instance, in a boy's challenge in acting as though he were strong and independent, preferring to stand alone. But as he develops in group therapy he derives happiness from friendship and cooperation. The therapy group helps its members toward some awareness of the necessity to pursue ends which are "good" for others as well as for oneself. Being accepted as an equal strengthens self-esteem which is further enhanced in the attempt to help others.

In this way the group offers a new experience to its members.

The common tendency for a new boy is to think only of himself; but this leads inevitably to failure to achieve desired personal goals within the group. For example, a boy may attempt to appease a "bully," hoping to maintain a personal advantage. But this will turn the group against him. On the other hand, the bully will not be pressured to change his behavior until sufficient mutual trust and solidarity are developed within the group to confront him as a unit. Thus each group member can see how his personal goals—in this case, freedom from coercion—can be achieved only through personal commitment to social living. He learns that in choosing a more constructive mode of behavior, one which meets the requirements of the situation, he can contribute to his own growth and that of others. Feelings of inferiority and self-centeredness are overcome to the extent that feelings of usefulness to the group develop.

#### *Delinquency as a Symptom*

The foregoing may be summarized roughly by saying that the well-being of the social whole and that of the individual member depend on the cooperation between the individuals. In this respect Adler makes the following differentiation between neurotic and healthy, whom he calls "normal," persons. "The neurotic strives toward personal superiority, and in doing so, expects a contribution from the group in which he lives, while the normal individual strives toward the perfection which benefits all" (1, p. 114). We see here the similarity between the delinquent and the neurotic which Adler always pointed out.

The dynamics of the delinquent's behavior are closely parallel to those of the Adlerian neurotic symptom. That is, the main significance of the symptom, as of the asocial behavior, lies in its help to the person in striving to attain his goal, or to "safeguard" his self-esteem (1, p. 263). The symptom intends to insure against failure, to get something, to agitate or overpower others. Altogether, behavior must always be seen as goal-directed, if it is to be understood or changed.

Another similarity between delinquent and neurotic behavior is the attempt to avoid responsibility. According to Adler, "The life plan of the neurotic demands . . . that if he fails, it should be through someone else's fault, and that he should be freed from personal responsibility" (1, p. 270). This tendency among our boys to ascribe all their failures to factors beyond their control is actively combatted

in the group. Initially the boys in general hold society, the judge, the police officer, etc. responsible for their past and present difficulties.

#### TREATMENT TECHNIQUES

In the following we shall describe several techniques that we have been using and that subsequently have become identifiable with techniques formulated by Adler (1), Dreikurs (2), and Haley (4). The discovery of their writings has been a great aid to us in conceptualizing our use of these approaches.

##### *Identifying the Purpose*

The counselor's aim is to have identified each boy's goals and his particular ways of trying to achieve his goals. When various aspects of the boy's attitudes and behavior have presented themselves to the group, and the other members have responded with a sufficient number of insightful comments, the counselor attempts, in a concerned non-judgmental manner, to sum up the impression gained about the boy and to confront him with the nature and consistency of his life style. The boy is then helped by the group to plan more constructive solutions to his problems, and encouraged to work toward a modification of his erroneous opinions and responses. In this each boy is treated as an adult and with equal respect.

Our basic approach allows each boy the freedom to be delinquent and verbalize aggressive feelings. This is viewed not in the service of releasing underlying repressed hostile impulses, but rather as a means of "disarming" the person who is using aggression as a means to maintain his faulty position of superiority. Within the meeting, manipulations of this type are dealt with by the other boys who label his problem for him, perhaps calling it the "big man act."

The case of Jim may serve as an example. During a group session he explained that he had little will power or motivation to change, and that if pushed to talk about himself in the group he would "blow his stack." After considerable group discussion the counselor suggested that perhaps his lack of will power was a means of eliciting help from others and that it thus was actually his strongest point; also that it takes in fact considerable will power or motivation to maintain the frequent temper outbursts which have the effect of getting others off his back. It was suggested that he could perhaps use all this energy for doing something else.

Thus it was explained to Jim that his symptom with the crucial aspect of "blowing his stack," actually has probably the purpose of gaining control over others which in fact it does. Such an interpretation of the symptom, which is quite Adlerian (2), is according to Haley the crucial aspect of a symptom (4, p. 15).

*Inducing Change*

Complexes or castration fears as concepts are not dealt with, as we can work with more tangible and cogent factors in the here and now. The conscious-unconscious dichotomy is not employed, as, in addition to being unnecessary, it assumes that determining forces exist outside the person's control, and they then serve as an excuse for his behavior. Rather, we can develop more real interest in problem solution when the counselor invokes the goal-directedness of the boy's behavior and its value to him, the boy's responsibility for it, and hence his capacity for change.

We might ask an uncooperative untidy boy, "When do you think you would be able to clean your room?" By thus forcing a choice or commitment, we can reach a point where we can hold him responsible. Even a recalcitrant boy can be dealt with effectively in this manner when this technique is employed by the peer group itself.

From the beginning we have viewed delinquent behavior in terms similar to Adler's, namely, as socially useless ways of dealing with "the tasks of life," including the demands of society. They are ways to achieve something in the environment by ruling over it, by controlling it. Specifically in the group, this means controlling both the other members and the counselor. When we encourage a delinquent boy to respond here as he does to others and to other situations in general, i.e., in accordance with his life style, we can recognize and understand this. We are permitting the symptom to occur in order that we may redefine or devalue it (4, p. 140).

Adler mentions the therapeutic use of reduction to absurdity (1, p. 398). With this technique we attempt to deal with a locked-in situation.

For example, one of the boys, a weight-lifter with a long history of fighting, tells the group repeatedly that he cannot talk more because when he gets into arguments he always loses control of himself and then "punches out" his adversary. This was interpreted by the counselor as the boy's attempt to maintain power and position in the group by intimidation. The counselor dealt with such assertion by initial acceptance, in fact encouragement, of the lad's symptomatic behavior, except that an attempt was made to rearrange that behavior in a situation where a change is possible. We asked this boy what he would do were he to meet the heavyweight boxing champion in a bar and then get into an argument with him. Would he then lose control? Reluctantly, our boy admitted that he thought he wouldn't, that he would back down. To this the counselor responded, "Well, I guess then, that you don't always have to lose your control after all. You can control yourself." To this the boy suddenly smiled in a knowing way. We had the feeling that we had "taken the wind" out of his defensive sails.

We gave this boy an insight that his response to a given situation could be different, that he was free to choose his response, that it was possible to change. We have done this without censoring the boy's symptomatic behavior, and without getting ourselves into a stalemate with him.

### *Utilizing Consequences*

One aspect of treatment consists in getting the boys to perceive the effects of their behavior within the social setting of which they are constantly a part. The emphasis is not on punishing delinquent behavior as such; rather, the communal atmosphere provides the means whereby a boy can see the consequences of his acts, both upon himself and the group. In this we follow another Adlerian principle of therapy. "We should not say that the individual must pay for his mistake, but rather that he must inevitably experience the consequences of his error" (1, p. 397). This has been applied to the treatment of delinquents by Papanek (6), and has in recent years been stressed particularly in child guidance by Dreikurs and been worked out by Dreikurs and Grey (3).

We have found the use of natural and logical consequences to be an excellent means of reducing friction. In this way we control less and guide more. As Dreikurs advocates (2, p. 84), we try to *stimulate* proper behavior since it no longer seems possible to enforce it. There are no bars, guards, or locked doors at Lakeside, as mentioned.

An example of our use of natural consequences is in regard to the boys' responsibility for maintaining their winter work-clothing and equipment. The natural consequence of forgetting or "losing" one's mittens is to have cold hands. We explain to the boys that the staff will not be responsible for their clothing and that it is their duty not to lose any equipment. We attempt to convey the notion that a boy does not *have* to do what we, the staff, would like him to do, but since we are not responsible for lost equipment we will not accept a boy's resulting discomfort as an excuse from working. Thus we allow for a natural flow of events to take place without staff interference.

Where natural consequences do not occur in our situations, the staff tries to structure events so that logical consequences will follow inevitably from some misbehavior. We avoid a power struggle or assertion of authority; we do not become agents of frustration or of threats of punishment. We leave the boy the freedom to choose what he will do. If his choice is delinquent behavior, this usually brings forth a proper and logical response from the group. Thus no

punishment is necessary, and the staff has not functioned in the apparent role of being against the boys.

### *Avoiding Power Struggles*

While our purpose is to leave the choice of his actions up to the boy, we try to avoid his gaining control over the staff and tyrannizing the facility, without engaging in a power struggle. For example, any boy is free to "run" from Lakeside at his choosing, provided he is willing to accept the logical consequences. These are in large part determined by the other boys. They include a "ship-out" back to court (based on a unanimous vote), or punishment within Lakeside for those who the boys feel can still be helped. In this way, we effectively prevent the boys from gaining a superior position over the staff by threatening to run away. Again, responsibility is placed back where it belongs, as the staff refuses to create a power struggle such as would be involved in an attempt to keep the building secure from exit, and to thwart all plans of escape.

The staff also employs quite literally the technique called by Dreikurs "withdrawing from the conflict" (2, pp. 155-161). We have made it a rule, whenever it seems that two or three boys might begin to fight with each other, to leave the scene of the altercation. We have found that by doing this, verbal threats have never materialized into real fights. If we were to stay at the center of the dispute, an actual fight would most likely occur, since the boys would attempt to gain power by committing the staff to a position, such as "don't fight."

In the same vein, we make no attempt to demand information of any kind especially with regard to criminal behavior before admission to Lakeside. In this way we eliminate the boys' advantage in control over the staff, which he would have if given the opportunity to withhold information. Usually, in a very short time the boy will volunteer any information that is needed.

### *Applying Democratic Principles*

One of the most effective devices for establishing lasting change, is peer pressure, as implied throughout. This presupposes withdrawal by the staff from any conflict, requiring the residents to handle their own problems. In a sense, the peer organization is the real society or culture at Lakeside, in which each member finds



himself and with which he must deal. Interestingly enough, while as individuals the boys may act in a delinquent manner, as a group they tend toward more responsible actions, as the only means for the group to survive. This understanding of the primacy of the group interest makes the group the most effective socializing agent. Behavior which threatens the group is not tolerated; neither are the boys' rationalizations offered for such delinquency.

A crucial therapeutic factor in our meetings is the value placed on genuine verbal interchange. To this end, culturally sanctioned values of tactfulness, good manners, and control of emotions are not demanded. Instead the boys are free to say anything they wish, and use any language they wish to express their feelings toward each other.

With some assistance from a counselor, the group gradually develops its own culture, values, and rules. Emphasis is placed on the democratic values as they relate to equal voting rights and self-expression for each of the members. A simple request to attend a local movie becomes a group task requiring agreement on general deportment and limit-setting away from Lakeside. Failure to reach a consensus is viewed by the group as a valid reason for not attending the movie. Of critical importance is the confrontation with a real situation whereby the group learns the consequences of its failure to commit itself in a socially responsible manner.

Role reversal is another method of stimulating cooperation. Prior to making unpopular decisions we involve the boys by asking: "What would you do if you were the staff?" In this way the group can provide an excellent source of social pressure for common sense. What is more, a question of this type tends to throw the responsibility back to the group while also serving to heighten each member's social interest.

The counselor, in his role, does not present himself as a traditional authoritarian figure. Rather he remains, in terms of our democratic standards, as a quite fallible human being who at times may make mistakes or not have the best answer. He remains nonjudgmental and accepting in attitude. His example of democratic leadership and honest expression is his primary means of promoting social feeling in the group. Of significance is that the counselor is a person whose "social interest is developed to such an extent that he follows the rules of the game of human society" (1, p. 131).

## SUMMARY

The program of a small residential treatment center for delinquent boys was found to share many of Adler's principles, and to use techniques described by him, Dreikurs, and Haley. In their daily work schedule and group therapy sessions the staff focuses on the contemporary problems and goals of each boy rather than concerning themselves with free association or the unearthing of early traumatic experiences. Each boy is treated as an adult and with equal respect, while his counselor helps him and his therapy group to see the mistakes in his life style and to correct them. The boys are helped to take responsibility for their choices and decisions by letting them experience the consequences of their actions and mutual confrontations with one another, while the staff withdraws from authoritarian conflicts. Each behavioral symptom is seen as a screen behind which the person is hiding in the effort to avoid possible defeat, so that his self-esteem and confidence in others must be increased. Individual Psychology seems well suited for a milieu therapy with juvenile delinquents as it postulates that beneath the attitudes of the individual with a personality disorder there is a rudiment of social interest which can be strengthened through the interpersonal relations found in group psychotherapy and communal living, and the opportunity for participating in useful work.

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