COTSWOLD COMMUNITY

WORKING NOTE NO. 7

by

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Introduction

This note summarises discussions at the Cotswold Community on October 18/19th, 1972, and my thinking about them since.

A General Comment

Before going on to specific areas of work I would like to comment on a few problems about which I have subsequently felt rather uneasy. The focus for the comment lies in what appears to have been a significant change in the client population of the Community. There seemed to be fairly general agreement among staff and consultants that the present intake of boys is more than usually disturbed: further, that this means that all Group Living units now have to cope with the kind of boys who would formerly have been almost exclusively in The Cottage. This greatly increases the pressure on Group Living staff. The subsequent "dis-ease" has spread to the Polytechnic and to the interchange of boys between them and is seen, for example, in the greater number of "school-refusers" in the Community at present. When I say "greater numbers" I have little idea, in fact, how many boys are concerned and for how much of this time. I am referring rather to strong feelings conveyed to me by the staff of both Group Living and the Polytechnic that there is a difficult problem at present of boys staying out of the Polytechnic and remaining in Group Living units.

I have found myself thinking a good deal of the effect of those pressures both on staff individually and on the management systems that contain these more than usually disturbed boys, and this has raised a number of questions that might merit examination. One should perhaps add as a further related pressure the effect on staff and their relation to boys of recent events in No. 11 preceding Trevor Blewett's taking over its management.

How far has the situation – perhaps justifiably – increased the staff's fear of violence among the boys with possible reactive violence from themselves? One staff member made this quite explicit. What steps, explicit and implicit, are being taken to deal with this? How realistic are they, in fact, in relation to the therapeutic task of the Community and the resources? A number of situations, or trends, discussed with me seemed to suggest some possible partial answers to these questions which, if I am right, will need further exploration.

How far is there an implicit move to evoke intense dependency responses from boys and emphasise a dependency culture which, if successful, would reduce violence at least temporarily. It is not easy to substantiate my feeling that this is so except by "hunch".

Many of the hard facts with which I would support it refer, in fact, to bits of work that may be quite effectively task-orientated: for example, the charts being prepared to facilitate ensuring that each boy has a trusted and "special" staff number always available can be a helpful managerial tool, but is it only that? Or does is also push staff and boys towards dependency unless carefully monitored? It is a long time since I heard Group Living staff put so much emphasis on the importance of bedtime individual care as I did on this visit, giving me the feeling it has changed from being an ordinary part of caring to being something more. There is the expressed need for higher staffing ratios – this could be simply a realistic reaction to the pressure of more ill boys, but again I wonder. And if one puts all these things together and adds the more subtle-feeling messages conveyed to me which are hard to make explicit and verbal, then I think there is some evidence to support the view that the pressure may be pushing the Community towards a dependency culture that would in some respects be anti-therapeutic.

This is linked with another trend which for what of a better word I have called "individualisation". Again, "evidence" comes from hunches and from the conclusion of a number of factors each of which in itself may be quite realistic in relation to task. The therapeutic resources charts emphasise the individuality of the boys and staff and their pairing (dependent) relationships rather than multiple group relatedness. The bed-time situation emphasises the point in which the group breaks up and the boys withdraw individually or in pairs to their own rooms with individual staff members' attention.

A single violent individual is obviously less frightened and damaging than a group roused to violence perhaps by a violent individual. Individualised boys would also, at least in fantasy, not become involved with other boys in anti-therapeutic and potentially dangerous sub-cultures.

I found myself wondering how far the Polytechnic "groups" are really groups in the coherent sense as much as an agglomeration of individualised boys focused on an available and peripatetic teacher and with minimal interactions among themselves. This is a hunch again – based on the way I have heard Polytechnic "groups" described and on one visit to the animals where, certainly while I was there, there was no real group. Boys worked with animals and interacted from time to time with Andrew Smail, but there was little that could be called group activity per se. Perhaps the boys who reject the Polytechnic in favour of Group Living are ultimate precipitates into individualisation from rather unintegrated groups.

A further important point concerns the actual disruption caused to the group and group-work in the Polytechnic by the demands from Group Living for additional help from Polytechnic staff to meet increased staffing needs. Groups in the Polytechnic are temporarily or permanently disrupted, or even disbanded and taken outside Polytechnic boundaries during the Polytechnic day – as witnessed by Fred Green working with a group of Orchard boys on Orchard premises and about Orchard business during Polytechnic hours. This seems to me a major violation of Polytechnic boundaries and of the containment of boys within them. One asks how far a vicious circle is being developed, or almost has developed in which there is a push/pull effect – the more

disturbed and less contained boy is pushed over the Polytechnic boundaries by lack of integration within, aided by the pull of dependency and individualisation with Group Living.

Again, if there is any validity in what I say, it would be important to examine it further since, obviously, pressure to individualisation of this kind could be anti-therapeutic for boys who need to learn to make effective relationships as a basis for a sounder identity and whose ability to hold effective group membership has an important role to play in their capacity ultimately to live outside the Community.

I am perhaps exaggerating when I say that I feel that a dependency/individualisation sub-culture may be as dangerous to the therapy of these boys as the more familiar aggressive delinquent sub-culture, but I am sure that if it is developing it must be important to take stock and try to return to more reality-based method of working with boys. Review is important in the short period while exploration is done into the ways of keeping the total "disturbance" level of the boy-population down to that with which staff can reasonably cope. Ways are being discussed of doing that, e.g. firmer boundary control concerning the entry of boys to the Community. I gather it is not easy to refuse disturbed boys if there are not sufficient less-disturbed boys available since total numbers could go down. An alternative is to make decisions to discharge boys who after an appropriate time in the Community are judged unlikely to benefit from its care or are too disruptive to its functioning. This would raise fairly important issues externally as to the Community's right to sustain its therapeutic objectives for suitable boys while other institutions may have to provide a more custodial type of care for boys less likely to benefit from such therapy.

Specific On-Going Developmental Areas

(i) De-Centralisation into Group Living Units

In spite of the tremendous pressure on Group Living staff the morale of Group Living staff seems to be high and development in important areas is continuing. Clarification of roles and tasks and their effective delegation goes on and is now proceeding effectively among male staff, particularly with the deputing of the important task of organising therapeutic resources in relation to boys and staff members.

Staff seem more secure and more identified with their roles and identifiable in them, an important development with such very disturbed boys.

(ii) Re-centralisation of the Mid-day Meal

Work has gone on in this area since my last visit but I was struck by a change in the atmosphere around this proposal to serve the boys' mid-day meal in the canteen, with

much more open expression of doubts and anxieties about the change. These would seem to me partly a reflection of the actual change coming nearer so that practical tasks and problems emerge to be dealt with; partly it seemed to me to be a reflection of the sorts of problems I have discussed above. Anxieties fall into a number of categories.

(a)   The management of boys in the canteen itself

It seemed to me there might be an exaggerated expectation of bad or aggressive behaviour, based partly on real experiences in the past, more perhaps on less realistic fears about what happens if the boys come together in groups or as a whole and violence supplants dependency, - dependency not being so easy to achieve in the canteen situation. However, accepting that there is some real risk, it seemed important to consider how best to minimise it.

A number of ideas were discussed for physical means to control, e.g. :-

   - small tables of six to eight boys with a staff member present;
   - some partitioning of rooms to reduce the number of boys present together;
   - some sound-proofing to cut down noise as a stimulus to acting-out;
   - food to be served in dishes at tables and/or by a "waiter service" provided by some
    boys rather than by total self-service.

The management of boys in the canteen would need to be done by professional and not domestic staff. As I commented in an earlier Working Note (No.6.) it would seem appropriate that the mid-day meal should be seen as part of the Polytechnic day and the main staff should, in theory, be Polytechnic staff, I am not certain what are the practical possibilities of this, however, and how far the assistance of group Living staff would be necessary.

(b)   The occupation of boys during the lunch break

The mid-day break from the Polytechnic is at present one-and-a-half hours, only a small part of which would be taken up by the meal itself. There is a good deal of uncertainty and anxiety as to what boys will do for the rest of the time: I am unable to sort out how much of this stems from the present situation of increased anxieties about what boys will do if left alone, how far it is a real danger. Certainly it is a problem that needs further exploration before the canteen mid-day meal is re-introduced.

(c)   The problem of boys who could not manage canteen meals

This was discussed in Working Note 6 but is a continuing anxiety – I would think again linked to the present increased concern with dependency. I would see getting all boys into the canteen as the objective and that boys who cannot manage it should be regarded as only out of the canteen temporarily with intensive work being done on helping them with their problem.

(d)   Marjorie Strange and Bill Douglas discussed the practical problem of providing choice of meals. This seems to fall into two parts. The first concerns providing adequate choice for boys with normal tastes, the second providing special meals for boys with difficulties, e.g. boys who do not eat meat.

As regards the first problem, choice involves providing more food than is necessary and must be restricted therefore. It was thought that probably two hot dishes and one cold would be adequate. With adequate freezing equipment, surpluses could be stored for later use.

As regards the second problem, it would probably be possible to make special arrangements for such boys, but my feeling again is that if at all possible this should be done within the canteen and not in Group Living units.

(iii)   <u>Relations Between Group Living and the Polytechnic</u>

This is an area which still seems to me to need a great deal of work. In particular I feel that the relations between Group Living and the Polytechnic tend to become especially disrupted and possibly anti-task when the Community as a whole is under pressure.

I have mentioned above the problem that seems to be caused when Group Living feels itself to be short-staffed and calls on the help of Polytechnic staff during school hours. Resulting disturbance in the Polytechnic then reverberates between the two areas. The agreement of both sides to this agreement is significant, implying some sense of a "therapeutic" priority in Group Living, linked again I should think, with the increased dependency culture. But proper respect for the educational function is also very important as is sustaining the immediate time-appropriate task. Should Group Living be required (and helped) to cut its cloak according to its cloth during Polytechnic hours? Or could there be an established resource pool of skilled and widely deployable men within Group Living to cover emergencies? Or again, is the dependency culture leading to unrealistic demands for staffing?

Respect for the boundaries of the Polytechnic seems to me very important, especially as an aide to strengthening the education function. Somehow, it seems it is only too easy to lose touch with the basic need for education as part of "therapy" and ordinary community living in the wider problems of therapeutic experiences for these very disturbed boys. There seems to be need for more integration between the two areas, more discussion of common problems and the need to explore how best to achieve this.

The vagueness of boundaries works the other way round as well. There has been a considerable reversion to earlier modes of referring to men who cross the boundaries from their primary task in the Polytechnic to become part-time Group Living staff. The balance between seeing them as Group Living or Polytechnic staff has rather moved back to the latter – one hears them referred to as Polytechnic staff being used as resource

people in Group Living, rather than being members of Group Living staff. Somehow they are differentiated from Group Living staff "proper".

(iv)   The Polytechnic

I find myself rather at a loss in discussing the tasks and problems of the Polytechnic and its place in the Community, partly because I am not an educational expert, but I do feel an uneasiness about it, shared by many staff and consultants, including those in the Polytechnic itself.

There is no doubt that the task of educating these boys is a difficult one, since so often it has to start with establishing their educability which is lacking or primitive because of the boys' early deprivation. Very special teaching skills are desirable for this task, and great patience. I wonder how much the present "activity orientation" of the Polytechnic contributes to the educational objectives, as against providing some more-or-less interesting and useful on-going activities to fill the boys' day and helping both boys and staff to feel that something useful is being done. How far do boys themselves at some level feel deprived and frustrated in relation to educational development by their present activities in the Polytechnic?

Linked with this, I wonder how far the Polytechnic could and should firm itself up? In particular, should its boundaries of staff and boy presence, or absence, of time, of occupation, be drawn more tightly? I have already mentioned my doubts about the real existence of groups in the Polytechnic – could firmer groups be more educational and also more therapeutic? What is the nature of discipline and authority in the Polytechnic which is, after all, the work situation for those boys?

I can do little more than question and suggest that it would be worth looking at Polytechnic functioning and their division of the total therapeutic task with Group Living from this point of view.

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