

# Paying lip service to change

Dr. Derek Miller, of the Tavistock Clinic, discusses the conflict between the wish for change and the difficult process of actually changing.

Individuals and organisations often seek help from experts with the implicit or explicit intention of becoming different and changing. The client may appear to be highly motivated and yet the attempt founders on rocks of mutual frustration.

This can be true both for smaller groups and for society as a whole. In society a major problem is that we attempt to create social change without social expertise. The Lord Chancellor implied recently that the change in the penal treatment of alcoholics would not occur until adequate community facilities were available.

Even if change is attempted with great social skill, one of the most difficult things to face for the technical 'expert', who may be hired as the agent to assist change, is relative impotence. There may be an image of what is needed to 'improve' the life situation of a client (whether an individual, a family group or an institution) after making a careful diagnosis of the situation. Nevertheless the object of the expert's 'ministrations' often shows a good deal of reluctance to move in the way that is hoped for by the 'client' or the change 'expert'.

## Good intentions

This is the case even though the client has made the request for help and has got a stated goal with which the 'expert' agrees. In the field of social and psychological change mutually held good intentions are not enough. One problem is that the 'expert' may begin to develop goals of his own, which are not those of the client. He may often be hardly aware that this is happening. He then tries to direct the clients in the way *he* thinks they ought to go.

In working with any institution or individual group to try to make change take place, there must be agreement, at a conscious and unconscious level, about the desirability of the next step. At each movement forward, if there is a recognition that the client is free to hesitate, change his mind, or withdraw, resistance to change is less likely.

All individuals and social organisations are in conflict between the wish to be dependent and indepen-

dent. Because of this, if they feel driven in a certain direction, there will either be active opposition or subtle sabotage. A technique associated with the latter is pseudo over-compliance; the organisation will slavishly climb onto the 'band wagon' of change and ask for more and more from the 'expert' producing a pathological state of 'helplessness'. When the 'expert' withdraws there is then a reversion to the *status quo*.

## Balanced equilibrium

The nature of the client is another problem of change. John Donne said 'no man is an island' and this is particularly relevant where change processes are concerned. Individuals set up a balanced equilibrium between themselves and their environment. A change in the way an individual functions leads to the need for change of people in the environment. This change is often resisted because the disturbed behaviour of one person may satisfy the unconscious needs of another. The play 'Come Back Little Sheba' in the 1930's clearly showed how the wives of some alcoholics often need their husbands to be dependent upon and needing them. On the one hand the wife will tell her husband not to drink, on the other hand she will send out for his liquor.

Similarly, in drug addiction, the addicted boy often provides for his mother a picture of helpless dependence which may meet many of her maternal needs. It may be important to her to keep her son dependent on drugs as a way of keeping him dependent on herself. A mother may say she wants her son to be grown up and be independent but acts in a way designed to keep for herself a dependent baby.

## Mutual pleasure

Promiscuousness is a common form of delinquent behaviour among girls. Often a disapproving mother gets a blow by blow description from her daughter about what happened. It seems possible that this gives a certain degree of mutual pleasure, of a not too healthy sort. In a very similar way the sexually potent, hyper-aggressive, promiscuous boy may

allow his inadequate father to live vicariously through his activities.

There is some evidence that groups of people in society need to have other groups on to whom they can project the internal difficulties and conflicts they experience themselves. Minority groups, who are accused of behaving in ways in which the majority would, perhaps, like to behave, but feel unable to, are an example. When the 'mods' and 'rockers' were rioting on the beaches, it was clear from the faces of the watching adults that they derived satisfaction from seeing the police obstructed. Every man's conflict about authority was, to an extent, played out through the actions of certain delinquents.

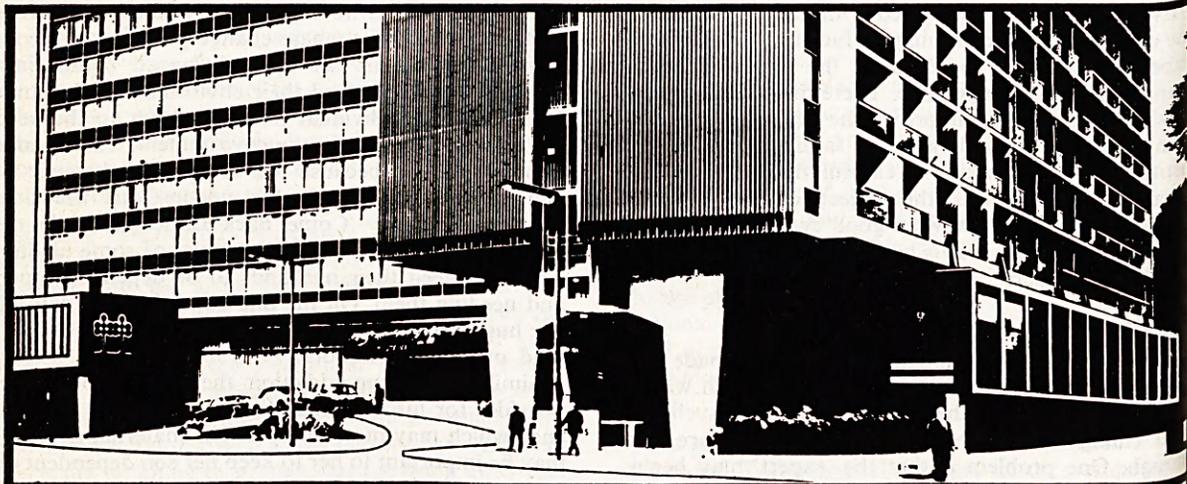
### Forbidden games

A youth club, whose staff knew that they could not cope with the aggressive behaviour of delinquents within the club, likely to occur if too many members were admitted at the same time, was highly reluctant to change its operating techniques.

The persistent refusal of society to consider the psychological needs of young people, when it engages in social engineering, would perhaps indicate the unconscious wish to have 'forbidden games' played out in the behaviour of some younger groups of society.

In planning change, whether for the individual of the group, the relationship of the individual to himself, his past experience and his family group in the here and now must be considered by those who wish to be helpful. The relationship of the client's family group is also relevant, both to a larger family network of uncles, aunts and grandparents, and their relationship to the network of people in the local neighbourhood. These in their turn are affected by the attitudes of the society at large.

It is not surprising then that, since a balance of functioning is set up between these groups, based on their interrelatedness, there is a resistance to change whatever the conscious wish for it may be. The weight from 'institutions', which presses on either an individual or a family, is likely to hinder attempts at maturation.



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