

Human Relations for Community Workers

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This article examines some of the continuing changes in our communities. It also looks at some of our beliefs which should guide us as we adapt our human relations to present and future changes.

CONTINUING changes in our communities make us more and more dependent on each other, antiquating more traditional, independent human relationships. This especially affects any of us working with young people, and requires that we learn with them to be better, more cooperative participants in group and community. As we explore this situation, we need to ask: (a) What are these changes which are disturbing community relations? (b) What do we believe in and want for people? We recognize that our beliefs will guide the things each of us will do to adapt our human relations to present and future changes.

Community Changes Require More Cooperative Human Relations

Change Toward Greater Mutual Dependence

When grandfather and his wife were young people, they were pretty self-sufficient. From raw materials right around them, they learned to produce almost everything they needed. What happened in the next town or county didn't affect them very much. None of us today can expect to be equally self-sufficient. More and more of us live in or near cities. Almost everything we need for living is produced by many unknown people, each doing

some special part of the job, requiring other dozens of strangers to transport and market the thousands of finished products. So we are nowadays each utterly dependent on the work and skill (and sense of personal responsibility) of hundreds of other people, few of whom we shall ever know.

More and more, special groups of people are being trained to do complex things which are necessary for the everyday needs of all the rest of us. Milk, food and fuel producers and processors, bus, truck and railroad workers, the owners of essential businesses and operator-managers of essential services—any of these, by refusing to perform their essential jobs, can make life almost impossible for the rest of us. Self-sufficiency and personal freedom are now quite different than in grandfather's time, because willy-nilly our actions are inseparably tied to the lives of more and more of our fellows, and theirs to ours.

Change Toward Less Cooperation

But grandfather learned to be pretty cooperative too. He worked and learned along with brothers and sisters and friends. He could see that the things he did alone and the things he did with others made a lot of difference to his own comfort, and to the comfort

of family and community, so he knew his work was important and needed. He learned unconsciously that he was independent yet cooperative, and that human cooperation meant things to wear and eat, things for warmth and protection.

Now, our boys and girls have less chance to learn to be cooperative. More mechanical power and machinery mean that we do not need or want young people in productive industries. They would be in the way, so we keep them more and more insulated from the workaday world until they are "grown up." And thus it becomes harder and harder for us as we grow up to learn from direct experience that we are really necessary to other persons around us.

In grandfather's time, competition was pretty impersonal. He and his fellows worked against earth and forest and weather, not so much against each other. The next town was several hard hours of travel away and folks over there weren't too necessary for his everyday needs, nor he for theirs. . . . Now, personal competition is emphasized, often at the expense of essential cooperation. Somehow we seem to be putting tremendous faith in the need to pit man against man, nation against nation. We say that people will not work unless driven by the urge to beat out the other fellow; what we're really saying is that we accept human greed and self-interest, regardless of and even at the expense of others, as the best drive to human accomplishment. So our children's chances to learn how to plan and act together are getting slimmer, and at the same time we are subtly setting their attitudes against essential

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group and community action. And this is happening at a time when our community society is becoming more complex and specialized, making us less able to exist without personal concern for each other. Both individual and national survival now depend on mutual cooperation.

These Changes Result from Dedication to Scientific Method

We need to understand something of what is behind these powerful and disturbing changes. Especially during this century we are increasingly applying the scientific method to improve our control over natural resources and natural power, in order to produce more and better things to make life easier and better. One guesses that we enjoy the practical fruits of science so much that we will continue to accept science as a key tool in our way of life. Believing in it so deeply, we will probably continue and even speed up the changes moving us toward more specialization, and hence more interdependent communities.

Implications for Today

There is more uncertainty and confusion ahead, unless we somehow learn to counteract the forces which are threatening to pull us apart, to break down essential human relations. Uncertainty and confusion arise from many unresolved conflicts in our communities today—conflicts between belief

in things and machines and belief in people, between what we expect of parents and what we expect of teachers and other community workers in rearing children, between ideas of individual freedom and of group loyalty, between competition and cooperation, between national sovereignty and international control.

Our elders have not handed down to us any ready answers to these unresolved conflicts. It looks as though our survival and that of democracy will depend on how soon and how well we can learn some solutions, through learning the complex job of cooperative human relations. We must experimentally develop new psychological and societal inventions to keep up with the changes brought on by our experimental inventiveness in applying science to industry and commerce.

If we agree that we must learn to work in school and community with this dedication to experimental improvement of human relations, then what are some of the basic beliefs and principles which we will seek to apply, because they point the way toward the answers we need?

What Do We Believe in and Want for People?

Democracy, like any other way of life, grows out of our commonly accepted beliefs about "human nature" and "the good life." If these beliefs are to bring a good life, they must be consistent among themselves, they must not deny our most reliable knowledge of human growth and behavior, and then they can become our guides for group action in school as well as in community relations.

Each Person Is Important, for Himself and for His Contribution to Others in His Group

We believe that a community exists for and profits greatly from the individual self-realization and unique contributions of its members. This implies that each person deserves, and society benefits from, every chance to develop his unique resources. A social order which unnecessarily limits this opportunity is both evil and unintelligent.

Our growing dedication to machinery and power unconsciously threatens this deeper dedication to human beings, at the same time that it denies others in every community the benefit of many contributions from each of its members. We have invented and perfected mass production through manufacturing intricately accurate, identical, interchangeable parts, easy to assemble into finished products, easy to repair by replacing worn parts from stockpile. Now we are by inference training people to be similarly alike, to be replaceable at will by any of other thousands of similarly trained people. It is an unconsciously easy step to the idea that we should replace any person who doesn't quite fit the machinery, dropping him into the discard can (flunking him out of school, dropping him from the club), or at best recognizing no concern for what happens to him because "after all, the race is to the fittest." . . . But if we believe that individuals are important in their own right, and valuable for what they can contribute to the rest of us, we must adapt our machinery of human relations, flexibly seeking out the astonishing, indispensable variations in people.

People Want To Work and Grow and Learn

We are waking up to the power and drive inherent in being alive, in living in a changing society. Our job is to find out how to help people free and focus their internal, natural power toward a fuller life. When we come to see that this urge is in people, we work with a particularly infectious confidence in people and in ourselves; others respond, compounding the joy in learning.

A basic viewpoint here is that we need to learn not so much how to do things *to and for* people (believing that they won't work otherwise), but rather that we learn to work *with* people (believing it is their human birthright to enjoy working). This dedication to people's innate power suggests that we may often unconsciously limit and even damage others by over-controlling, over-directing, unnecessary punishing, unwarranted threatening by shame and fear. We need to learn to be confident in people and therefore patient with them; to learn how to skillfully help them to discover and release their own latent powers.

Responsible Participation in Freely Cooperative Groups Sets the Stage for This Release of Individual Power

Several conditions are necessary for effective group organization:

(a) The operation of any group should grow out of and continue to fit the interests and concerns of the various individuals in the group, for any individual will work voluntarily and actively to the extent that he sees direct relation to urges and motives within himself.

(b) This implies flexibility and variability in plan and schedule, since different individuals and different times mean wide differences in concerns and interests around which a working group will focus.

(c) It implies that individuals comprising the group actually have responsibility at all stages in their work. Although the power and urge to work and learn are inherent, release of these depends on whether or not each individual consistently finds that he is actually free and welcome to participate. Subtle punishment, being ignored, having to give way to an authoritarian "leader," all deprive many participants of chances to explore and work on their own internal needs. Others in the group are the losers, too, for each person has potentially important ideas and information to contribute, things no one else will know or think of.

We Are Rediscovering the Positive Power of Human Warmth and Mutual Support over Negative Human Indifference and Rejection

There is increasing evidence that enjoyment releases a person's inner energies for constructive learning, while prolonged, excessive unpleasantness restricts and distorts his inner drives. If our first, hesitant, tentative testing of a group finds people accepting, permissive, encouraging, we are freed to try a little deeper look inside our own uncertainty. This takes time, and often flies in the face of the ways we have been trained to work in groups, but it gradually pays rich dividends. People shake off their old fears and uncer-

tainty, dare to admit ignorance, to toss in their own untested ideas and knowledge. They also come to anticipate helping and supporting others, returning to the group many times over what they have received from the group.

*We Are Learning That We Can
Apply the Scientific Method to
Problems in Human Relations*

This method has proved valuable in attacking the relatively simple problems of natural sciences; maybe it can now be turned toward solving the problems of community change which its use has helped to create.

All the requisites for effective group action so far considered are not enough when community groups try to tackle important, complex jobs. We are often unskilled in the essential steps in problem solving: (1) identifying and limiting the job; (2) collecting pertinent, dependable information; (3) suggesting many possible interpretations of the information collected; (4) rechecking these tentative interpretations against old evidence; (5) suggesting new information needed to select between alternative explanations; (6) drawing over-all conclusions based on interrelating the dependable explanations reached so far; (7) suggesting implications for next steps for action and further research.

Few of us have been so trained, especially when our problems concern human relations. Even with some training we are still deeply involved emotionally, and our inner drives and unrecognized feelings and beliefs get in the way of dependable objectivity when we are a part of the situation. But even here, a supportive, cooperative group gives mutual help; we can learn to help each other detect partial or biased "evidence," unwarranted or too simple interpretations, unjustifiable conclusions. Several people working cooperatively can bring in more detailed information and remember more explanatory generalizations. Again, the group provides a superior way to tackle problems involving human relations.

We begin to suspect that training in scientific method throughout school and community life will be necessary if we are ever actively to control our human affairs instead of being tossed blindly and helplessly around. Our democratic faith rests on the decisions of all of us; we must help people learn to handle the mental tools needed for reaching deeper insight and sounder decisions. Decisions involving us all are now being made and will continue to be made by someone; democracy commits these decisions to the people, and we need to be deeply dedicated and intelligently qualified.

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