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Transitional Communities and Social Reconnection

The Civil Resettlement of British Prisoners of War*

*The Prisoner of War Experience and
the Problem of Repatriation*

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SCHEME

In the early years of World War II the need of repatriated British Prisoners of War (PsOW) for assistance in readjusting was not urgently manifest, but, as more men returned after escape or were repatriated on medical grounds, the rate of sickness and disciplinary offenses caused anxiety. Officially, PsOW were regarded both as “casualties” and as men awaiting trial by court of inquiry to re-establish their military rights. Though this attitude was largely historical and was weakened by experience of returned men, ambivalence, shown by simultaneous idealizing and scapegoating, remained.

Through the Army the POW returned to his own society. It was the Army that possessed special understanding of his difficulties, just as it had been responsible for his troubles. Among institutions in his home society it was of the Army that he was most suspicious, yet it was on the Army that he was most dependent. Despite a certain opposition to differential treatment, among both military and civilian groups, and also among PsOW themselves (many of whom were determined to deny the existence of their difficulties), it was decided at Cabinet level that the repatriate needed not only special training to

*No comprehensive account of the Civil Resettlement Scheme developed in the British Army during 1945–1946 had been available prior to the publication in G.E. Swanson, T.E. Newcomb and E.L. Hartley (Editors), *Readings in Social Psychology*, 1952, of this paper prepared by the second author from existing manuscripts.

refit him for military duty, but that the Army should itself undertake the first steps toward re-equipping him for civilian life.

This policy sanctioned the development of a scheme based on technical studies. At the beginning of 1945 a pilot Civil Resettlement Unit (CRU) was formed. By the end of that year (PsOW having been repatriated from all theaters of war), there were twenty CRUs operating in different parts of the United Kingdom, each capable of dealing with some 240 men at any one time. These units acted as bridges between the Army and civilian life. They were designed as *transitional communities* to permit change of attitudes which retarded re-assumption by the repatriate of a fully participant role in civilian life.

THE NATURE OF DESOCIALIZATION

Unsettling on repatriation could not be understood solely as a disturbance in the repatriate himself. His family was also affected. On the larger social scale this was reflected in the relations generally between those returning from the services and those who had remained in civilian life. Resettlement was a two-way process, calling for emotional readjustment by all members of the re-formed family and the wider community.

From this wider point of view unsettling may be regarded as a process of *desocialization*. Desocialization can be defined only in relation to a general concept of society, since it appears differentially related to various components in the total social order, such as *social structure*, *social roles*, *social relationships* and *culture*.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

This term covers social forms (economic, kinship, governmental, etc.) which together act as a more or less stable and organized framework within which the basic needs of the individual may be met. Structure is external to the individual—something felt as “out there.” The effects of structural breakdown on the individual cannot, however, be traced without additional concepts, for considerable structural breakdown may often be survived with little desocialization, while desocialization may occur apart from structural breakdown.

SOCIAL ROLES

Structure by itself gives no information on the position taken up by the individual within it. A number of such positions are possible, referred to as social roles. While structure is there, it is up to the individual himself whether

he takes an available role. Through failure to take roles he goes out of the social framework in certain directions. *Failure to take roles* may be proposed as one criterion of desocialization.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Once roles are taken, social relationships begin to be made. Their course, however, is not determined by the roles which are a condition of their beginning. The structure of his society may initially determine whether or not an individual may take a certain role, but other factors enter with respect to his ability to handle and make good the widening and changing series of relationships, variously personalized and intimate, in which he is involved if his participation and satisfaction are to continue. *Failure to sustain social relationships* provides a second criterion of desocialization.

CULTURE

Culture represents the means, however imperfect, at the disposal of the individual for handling his relationships. On it he depends for making his way among, and with, other members and groups belonging to his society. The central thesis of this paper is that *it is the internal assimilation of culture that is primarily disturbed in the process of desocialization*. This gives the third criterion to which the other two may be related.

An inquiry into desocialization, therefore, implies an assessment of the level at which an individual possesses internal assimilation of his culture. So far as he has reached a state of cultural dispossession, the breaking of relationships and the refusal of roles have serious consequences, for he now lacks the resources to make the restorations necessary and the resilience to resume abandoned activities. The process will now be traced which induced desocialization in repatriated PsOW, despite the degree of structural equilibrium in post-war Britain.

THE COURSE OF DESOCIALIZATION IN THE REPATRIATE AND HIS FAMILY

At first, while serving in his home country, the soldier carried over into the Army a good deal of his former civilian being. Nevertheless, it was a common observation by servicemen that they soon found it difficult to take an effective part in their family affairs.

When the soldier was drafted overseas he had to make a second adjustment.