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1977

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McCarty, Patrick F., "The Group Foster Home Counselor: An Anthropological Analysis" (1977).

*Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies*. 461.

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# THE GROUP FOSTER HOME COUNSELOR: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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The group, foster home provides an appropriate setting for an anthropological analysis of the evolution of political power—its acquisition, maintenance, and transfer. This paper discusses the relationship of roles between the group-home counselor (as the leader) and the adolescent, foster boys (as the leader's power base). As this power base is established, the leadership role changes from "strong" to "weak" and is transferred to subsequent counselors who must undergo this same political process.

† † †

## INTRODUCTION

The following study is based on an eighteen-month, personal experience as a live-in counselor in a Midwestern group, foster home for adolescent boys. Because of the structured nature of the home, it was apparent that the political-anthropological model posited by F.G. Bailey in his book *Strategems and Spoils* (Bailey, 1969) would be appropriate to use for a political analysis.

The counselor position in the group, foster home provided an excellent example to test the Bailey model. The attainment, maintenance, and subsequent transfer of political power are discussed as a four phase, evolutionary process: Settling-In, Conflicition, Stabilization, and Transition. Factors which enhance or detract from the counselor's status are also discussed.

This process basically involves an initial "strong leader" role with strict application of normative rules. As a power base is established and the counselor's authority is recognized, he can safely rely on pragmatic rule to govern the group home in a "weak leader" role.

The discussion begins with an explanation of Bailey's terminology, followed by a descriptive account of the group-home setting and the counselor's position. The foster-care system and its administrative structure are also briefly described. The main body of the paper is a political analysis of the counselor's position as outlined in the four phases above.

Before proceeding further, the Bailey terminology used throughout this study should be defined. Those terms frequently used are: *strong and weak leaders, moral and transactional teams, confrontations and encounters, and normative and pragmatic rules.*

There is a basic role differentiation between a "strong" and "weak" leader. The power to implement tasks assigned by these leaders is relatively the same but is utilized in different fashions. That is to say, by the terms "strong" and "weak" there should be no confusion over the competency to lead of these two types of leaders.

The "strong leader" *commands* out of necessity. He maintains a transactional arrangement with his team. That is, he commands and obtains compliance through the distribution of money and privileges. The relationship is purely transactional as is the leader's base of support or "team."

Conversely, the "weak leader" operates under a different arrangement. He obtains compliance by *request* only, as his relationship to his power base or team is moral—based on some common ideology held by himself and others. The team adheres to this ideology, which provides the unifying element. Thus, the relationship in this case is moral.

The struggle to maintain political power takes the form of confrontations and encounters. A confrontation is a message sent from a leader to his follower telling the latter of his own strengths and resources. This may escalate into an encounter when a particular behavior or event occurs. These two forms of competition are the bases of power control in a political situation.

Finally, both normative and pragmatic rules may serve as a guide to conduct in political competition. Normative rules are *culturally* defined behaviors, commonly shared and internalized by the group. They are ideological. Conversely, pragmatic rules are *situationally* defined as those most appropriate and practical for any particular situation. These may involve a re-interpretation of the normative rule not explicitly stated in that rule or a temporarily created rule for a particular time and place.

## THE SETTING

The position of a group-home counselor demands that an individual be on duty (as a surrogate parent) twenty-four hours per day, twenty-two days per month. Basic requirements are: disciplining and counseling of one to eight adolescent foster boys (ages thirteen to eighteen years), caring of the

house, grocery shopping, transportation and bookkeeping.

The basic philosophy of a group home is to provide peer-group association, coupled with the guidance of the group-home counselor and the boys' social worker. This arrangement ideally prepares the boys for placement in an individual-family foster home (for the younger boy) or for independent living (for the older boy).

Because of the unusual nature of many of the boys, a structured arrangement was established. In the study-case, group home, a Behavioral Modification system was instituted whereby certain established normative behaviors were rewarded with "points" which were readily transferable into money and privileges. Failure to comply with the normative rule meant loss of points and the associated rewards. The system was designed to encompass all the boys' daily activities—hygiene, school attendance, housework duties, curfew, etc. The social worker referred to this treatment program as a "token economy." This is the setting in which the counselor operated.

### THE COUNSELOR'S POSITION

The position of counselor in a group foster home is, in some respects, identical to that of a real parent. The distinction of roles lies in the fact that there is a treatment structure in the group home not found in the "real world." Also, counselors are, of course, not real parents.

A diagram best serves to illustrate the position of a group-home counselor in the hierarchical structure of the Division of Family Services for the Midwestern state in which the study-case, group home is located (Fig. 1).

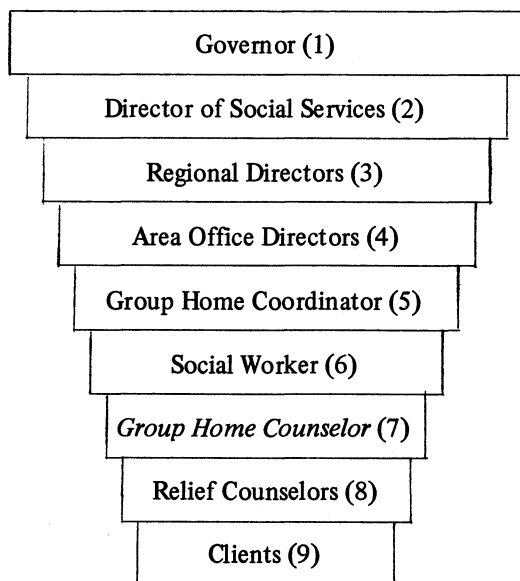


Figure 1. Administrative structure of the Division of Family Services.

The relative position here indicates that the group home counselor is near the bottom. The foster boys (or "clients") are lowest in the structure. In examining this diagram, the most important consideration to keep in mind is that interaction that is intensively related to the daily functioning of the group home occurs between numbers 5 through 9. The administrative structure above (numbers 1 through 4) is the policy-making body. Those below them (numbers 5 through 8) carry out this policy and obtain their positions from this body. They constitute the counselor's (leader's) initial *moral* team and remain a moral team. Position 9 is the leader's initial *transactional* team.

The counselor's position as a leader is *both* an achieved and an ascribed status. It is ascribed in that the administrative structure has legitimately licensed the individual to operate the home. However, the counselor must also *achieve* the status of leader. The respect and authority necessary to implement the leadership role must be earned. Leadership is based on ability *and* achievement. This involves: 1) assertion of the normative structure (or house rules); 2) support from the leader's staff (or moral team); and 3) gradual compliance and acceptance of the leadership status by the client-transactional team.

### FOUR PHASES OF POWER ACQUISITION AND TRANSITION

The functioning of the group-home leader involves a four-phase process. During the entire period of the counselor's stay, political credit and power are acquired, and authority is recognized by all. It should be pointed out that these four phases are in no way exclusive of one another. The process is *not* totally clearcut or in select stages, but rather an ongoing political procedure.

These four phases may be described as: first, *Settling-In*; second, *Conflict*; third, *Stabilization*; and fourth, *Transition*. The first two phases involve a basic period of personality conflict. The particular type of boy dealt with is significant in affecting the composition of the client group at any time. During these phases, it is essential to maintain consistent adherence to the normative rules, thereby acquiring political power for the leader.

The remaining two phases mainly consist of the maintenance and transfer of political power. The leadership position has already been achieved by this time, and most daily matters involve bolstering one's power through a more loosely structured system of consent by request rather than by demand.

### SETTLING-IN AND CONFLICT PHASES

When a new leader is settling into his new role as group-home counselor, he must act as a "strong leader." In the Settling-In phase, the new counselor must attempt to tran-

scend the moral commitment that the clients have toward their former leader. The new leader must make it known that *he* is now the leader and will be commanding the respect of each of the boys.

In the study-case, group home, the former leader did not accept the normative structure; he reinforced by pragmatic rule entirely. He did not seek the moral team support of his staff, but rather formed a faction with the clients in direct conflict and competition with the staff. Therefore, the clients adopted the political philosophy of the former leader, making the re-establishment of the original normative structure difficult.

It was necessary to establish a new set of normative rules (within the boundary of the original structure) based on the values of the new leader. This added additional strength to the new leader's power base in that the new rules structure was specifically tailored to his political philosophy.

During this time period, the relationship between the leader and client is necessarily transactional. Certain behaviors are rewarded with favors in the form of money and other resources. The clients form the leader's transactional team, while his staff is his moral team. The entire moral team is ideologically united in their political philosophy regarding the treatment program. They are rewarded by the successes obtained in utilizing this program (as measured by the clients' progress). This phase is an initial "feeling out" period. The leader has been ascribed his position, but as time passes, there are increased challenges and tests of his authority.

These instances are part of the Conflict phase. During this period, stress situations (in the form of confrontations and encounters) are frequent occurrences. The transactional team is attempting to test the power of their leader, based on his adherence to the rules *they* have broken and on his ability to meet the challenge of each new encounter. This becomes a matter of withstanding these stresses consistently.

In the case-study group home, it was necessary to utilize a change in one aspect of the normative structure to overcome the challenges of the transactional team on the leader's authority. The clients still recognized the normative structure as the ultimate authority. In a moral team meeting, it was decided that the leader's authority should, at certain times, overrule the rules' system. This implied that behavioral deviances not covered specifically on the rules sheet would be dealt with individually. The decision strengthened the leadership status in that an important judicial task was added to the leader's role. Nonetheless, leadership was ultimately acquired through consistent adherence to a "strong" leadership role with the transactional, client team.

### STABILIZATION PHASE

Up to this point, the leader's moral team in the group

home is his staff, from whom he draws support and with whom he reaffirms the normative structure. Client support is based solely on a transactional arrangement, whereby resources in the form of money and privileges are exchanged for conformity to the rules.

Once power, authority, and respect have finally been recognized by the transactional team and realized by the leader, the Stabilization phase begins. In the past, the leader had maintained a "strong" role, commanding respect based on compliance to the normative rules in exchange for certain rewards. During the Stabilization phase, it is possible for the leader to assume a "weak" role. The stress brought about by the constant confrontation and encounter situations is greatly reduced. It is only during isolated incidents (such as client acting-out) that the leader again reasserts a "strong" position.

With this stable situation and his recognized political power, the leader can begin to revert to requesting compliance through pragmatic rule interpretation. Both the leader and client have accepted one another's roles. This shared recognition makes way for the formation of a second moral team, the former transactional client team. This team is evolved and maintained separate from the staff moral team and is ideologically based on friendship rather than the treatment goal. There is mutual respect. There is also the remaining transactional element in the rewards system. However, favors beyond the scope of the house rules as political intangibles are exchanged. The client may be no more satisfied or in agreement *philosophically* about the normative structure (as the leader's first moral team is) but, again, compliance is contingent on the moral tie to the leader. This tie continues to maintain the system until the leader departs and transfers his power to his successor.

### TRANSITION PHASE

The final phase of the evolutionary political process begins as the leader makes preparations for his departure. The condition in which he leaves the political structure of the group home will greatly affect the new leadership. If the leader has consistently adhered to the normative structure, it will be advantageous to his successor.

The outgoing leader also finds it necessary to break the moral ties with both teams, although never entirely. He must stress the importance of carrying on the tradition of the structure to both teams. Ideally, this will help to assure a continuity in the transfer of power and provide some added incentive for the new leader.

### SUMMARY

The preceding discussion has centered on the political analysis of power acquisition, maintenance, and transfer as illustrated by the position of a counselor in a group foster

home. This process was traced in four different, but not mutually exclusive, phases: Settling-In, Conflict, Stabilization, and Transition. The political model of the social anthropologist F.G. Bailey was used as a guide for this analysis.

The counselor begins as an ascribed leader and must acquire power through adherence to the normative rule structure. In Bailey's terms, he must be a "strong" leader. In the beginning, his moral team is his professional staff, while his client group forms his transactional team.

As a power base is established with the client team following extensive confrontation and encounter with them, the leader builds up political credit based on successful performance as a "strong" leader. Thereafter, he can comfortably assume the "weak" leader role based on pragmatic interpretation of the normative rules' structure. The transactional client team eventually becomes the leader's second moral team (distinct from the staff moral team) with rewards based on the ideology of friendship and mutual respect.

As the leader relinquishes his position to his successor, this political process begins anew. However, the condition in which the leadership role is left will greatly influence the effectiveness of the new leader.

#### REFERENCE

Bailey, F.G. 1969. *Strategems and Spoils: A Social Anthropology of Politics*. New York, Schocken Books.