COMMUNITY CULTURE AND THE SOCIAL WORKER

The professional social worker may be described as a person engaged in a planned and systematic attempt to bring about changes in habitual patterns of behavior of those with whom he works. This is not, of course, the only way the social worker's role can be conceptualized, but this conceptualization can provide a useful point of departure—especially in regard to those areas of behavior which appear at the same time to be largely supported by community norms and to present problems. If bringing about changes in habitual behavior patterns is seen as a major objective, it would follow that a logical starting point would be a firm knowledge of what those patterns are. Social work espouses the principle—"Start where the client is"—but the ways used to describe where he is are often limited or inadequate when direct community work or community-conditioned behavior is involved.

Most frequently the client's behavior is described in terms derived from the psychodynamic frame of reference; individuals or groups are characterized as "immature," "lacking ego strength," "overly dependent," and so on. When a community rather than the individual is to be characterized, the demographic or economic level of description is generally used. This usage has its roots in social work's interest in determining the "needs" of the community in order to plan a pattern of social service, so that the descriptive terms used are those which serve as indices of "need"—number of broken homes, income levels, number of families per dwelling unit, crime and delinquency rates, and so on.

Neither of these two levels of description—the individual personality level
and the demographic-economic level—adequately handle a body of information that should be of dominant concern to the worker—a thorough knowledge of the habitual patterns of behavior characteristic of the clients’ community—their form, their substance, their color, their feeling tone. The basic question to be asked in this area is—"What are the customary ways of behaving, perceiving, relating, that people manifest by virtue of the fact that they are part of a group which supports conformity to a specific set of behavioral norms and penalizes deviance from them?" Answering this question, which refers to that range of data called "culture" by anthropologists, should be an essential preliminary step in any program aimed at producing changes in culturally-influenced behavior.

It would appear that gathering such information would entail a reasonably straightforward job of fact finding, but such is not the case. There are at least two reasons why information of this kind is hard to obtain. The first is that relatively little systematic research has been done in this area, and the second, related to the first, is that the job of providing accurate answers to this question is surrounded by a highly charged set of cultural taboos. There are reasons for not getting accurate answers to this question, or even in asking it seriously in the first place; these are often related to personal insecurity regarding one’s own class or ethnic status, or to professional values which minimize the importance of group-related differences.

For most individuals, the social class group to which they belong—its customary ways of behaving, its condoned sets of standards, its ways of reacting to and evaluating members of other class groups—has a profound influence on behavior and attitudes. This influence is of special importance when members of different social classes habitually contact one another in the course of their work. It is most difficult, for example, for an individual brought up in a home where cleanliness and responsibility have been highly valued to contact a home where such concerns are of low priority without experiencing a negative emotional
response. It is perhaps even more difficult to view with real objectivity one's own social status relative to others, or position in reference to "social climbing"--a concern which can be a ruling motivation in one's life, but which, because an overly-explicit commitment to this is adjudged reprehensible, is seldom admitted or faced directly.

Inadequate insight or insufficient knowledge as to the nature and influence of social class factors may be of little importance in many occupations, and even in some kinds of social work--but for many social workers inadequate knowledge in this area may constitute a serious impediment. This is because a great deal of social work brings workers into direct and intimate contact with clients whose class background is different from their own. In such situations, there is a strong tendency to perceive and characterize much of the client's behavior in terms often subtly and unconsciously colored by evaluative moral judgments derived from the worker's own social class position.

In recent years, social work has become increasingly cognizant of the influence of cultural differences related to ethnic status; there has been less recognition of the importance of cultural differences related to social class status. One way to appreciate the critical impact of social class status on many kinds of behavior is to focus attention on one important class group in our society--the urban lower class. In addition to serving as a device for sharpening insight into the influence of cultural factors on behavior, familiarity with the way of life of this group can have considerable practical utility for those social workers whose clientele includes residents of this kind of community. Very frequently personality characteristics or behavior patterns which are perceived as

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1. A recent study by Hollingshead, A. and Redlich, F. ("Social Class and Mental Illness: A Community Study", New York, Wiley, 1958) documents in detail the critical influence of social class status--both of the patient and the therapist--on the treatment disposition of the mentally ill. Class-related considerations are as important to the social worker as to the psychiatrist in formulating and executing a treatment program.
deviant or even pathological in the context of a treatment-oriented institutional milieu in fact represent customary and expected behavior in the context of the lower class community.

"Lower Class Culture": Nature and Extent

"Lower Class" as a Descriptive Concept: The term "lower class" has been standard sociological usage for some years. There persists, however, a widespread reluctance to designate any individual or group as "lower class"—a reluctance related to class-sensitivity and egalitarian values—which may serve as a serious impediment to the systematic and effective usage of a large body of relevant data. The existence of this segment of society, and the need of a reference term for it are, however, universally recognized, and in customary social work usage this group is generally referred to as the "working class" or "lower income group".

Neither of these terms is particularly satisfactory. Reserving the term "working class" for lower class implies inaccurately that middle class people are "non-working", and neglects the fact that the bulk of the unemployed, in fact, come from the "working" classes. Nor can class status be simply equated with income level, especially today. There are "rich" and "poor" in both lower and middle class. A truck driver or plumber may make seven thousand dollars a year, compared to four thousand for a grammar school teacher—yet the teacher leads a clearly "middle class" way of life, while the truck driver uses a set of speech patterns, a manner of dressing, a pattern of allocating his income definitely identifiable as lower class.

Which criteria are used to define social classes and the relative importance of various criteria is a complex matter, discussed in detail by several authors.¹

Commonly employed criteria are income (level, source), occupation, education, family background, country of family origin, ethnic status, and "power" position. Depending on the criteria used, and the locale of study, different numbers of "classes" may be derived, differently composed. In most studies by sociologists, a primary concern is with "ranking"—the attempt to place various class groups in higher or lower positions on a scale of status ("stratification"). No such attempt is made here; an individual or group is characterized as "lower class" according to the extent to which observed behavior patterns reflect designated features of lower class culture; the term is thus used in a descriptive sense and does not imply a negative evaluation of this group—an evaluation often associated with the term "pauper". To discriminate between important subsegments of our society is not to discriminate against them; a greater sensitivity to discrete class groups in our society would aid social workers in obtaining important information on such groups.

Many social workers approach social class and other cultural concepts with considerable wariness through fear of "stereotyping". "Stereotyping" is seen as the mark of a prejudiced person, who will say "All Negroes are dirty and thieving"; "All Jews are cliquish and stingy"; "All slum residents are drunks and loafers". A cultural generalization about a given ethnic or subcultural group often resembles such statements; for example—"A substantial percentage of Jewish families tend to live in largely Jewish communities and to maintain close interactive relations with other Jewish families". In this statement, the terms "a percentage of" and "tend to" indicate that this generalization does not apply to all Jews, but rather provides an economical way of describing and even predicting a behavior pattern characteristic of a significant part of that group. Fear of the association of "stereotyping" with "prejudice" may impel the social worker to reject

broad generalizations about groups or classes of individuals, and to overlook the fact that most "stereotypes" do in fact contain some element of truth. Stripped of their deprecatory cast, phrased in neutral descriptive terms, and properly qualified, they often represent a distillation of folk wisdom with considerable cogency. Many Jews do tend to associate primarily with other Jews; many Irish do drink frequently; many slum residents do spend a good deal of time "hanging out" at bars or on corners. These statements neither apply accurately to all members of the cited group nor do they tell all there is to be told about the group—but to reject the total statement because of these limitations is to prevent oneself from using constructively that element of it which is true. In one sense, the statement "Individuals who have immature mothers will exhibit problems around dependency" is also a stereotype—applying with greater or lesser validity to members of the group referred to—but such statements generally are not perceived as stereotypes since the group described is not an ethnic, class, sex or locality group ordinarily subject to overt discrimination.

A properly qualified and research-based general statement about the behavior of a class of individuals (women, factory workers, adolescents, Chinese, Texans) when used with discrimination and the realization that it is not meant to apply with equal accuracy to all members of the designated group, can be of great utility to those serving such groups. It is impossible to eliminate the danger that a generalized reference to any class of individuals will be misused, oversimplified, or distorted by some, but this should not mean that all such statements be thereby avoided. The fact that the term "adolescent" has come to be associated with the concept "delinquent" is a good example of present-day stereotyping, but we do not on this account also reject all statements which begin "The adolescent (viz., "all adolescents") faces characteristic problems of adjustment which...etc.". What is needed is the capacity to distinguish between more and less valid "stereotypes" rather than an avoidance of generalized statements about "classes" of individuals.
Some analysts of lower class culture—Davis, Havighurst, and more recently, Albert Cohen and Martin Loeb—have taken as their analytic and perceptual starting point a set of practices and standards identified as "middle class", and have considered lower class culture primarily in reference to this baseline. Using such concepts as "the middle class measuring rod" or "The Core Culture" as key terms in treating lower class culture leads to a conceptualization of that culture as a defective variant or imperfect reflection of middle class culture. This approach generally starts out by setting up a check list of dominant concerns of middle class life such as ambition, thrift, cleanliness, achievement, and so on, and then selects for description those aspects of lower class life which appear to correspond to these concerns. Of necessity, this procedure produces a picture of a culture whose basic features are at variance with those of middle class culture, and by an easy logical extension, in conflict with them. A further extrapolation from this starting position produces the view that the basic problem of the lower class child is that of "coming to terms" with the "dominant" middle class cultural system as exemplified and supported in the schools, courts, and social agencies.

It is true that the concerns of middle class culture are familiar to Americans in all social groups, and no lower class child who attends school, goes to the movies, watches television or is committed to a correctional institution can avoid exposure to these values and the problems encountered in accommodating to them.


2. Loeb, M., "Implications of Status Differentiation for Personal and Social Development", Harvard Educational Review, Vol.23, No.3, 1953. Loeb writes, "persons below this core...segment are working toward achieving the values and behavior of the core group..." (p.169). On page 171 he says, "delinquency...is a way of coping with...the conflict of the parental class culture and a different class culture...in ways society in general disapproves." In these ideas, the middle class cultural system is clearly taken as a reference point. The prevalent assumption of upward mobility as a dominant motivation of lower class people implied in the first quote is open to serious question for substantial segments of the lower class population.
But it is dangerous to assume from this that everyone is equally influenced by this cultural system, or that it serves as a central reference position for all. An individual born and raised in a lower class cultural milieu derives his basic perceptions and values from that milieu. Since the various lower and middle class cultural subsystems are by no means separate and discrete they contain many and overlapping elements, but each represents a distinctive patterning of similar and diverse elements, and it is this pattern which influences behavior. Furthermore, the reverse problem—that of the middle class child coming to terms with lower class culture as communicated to him through rock and roll, television and movie drama, and other channels—is becoming increasingly acute.

It is often difficult for a middle class professional who moves in a world of offices, organizations, conferences, and the New York Sunday Times to realize how insulated from this world a resident of a lower class community can be. During most of his waking hours he moves in a social milieu peopled with others like himself, and when he touches on the fringes of the middle class world—on his job, in school, through a movie or television program, it appears remote and substantially irrelevant to him and his concerns. A lower class boy can undergo a forced exposure to the sentiments and concerns of middle class schoolteachers for ten years of his life without really investing much of himself in the experience. Even while in class, his mind and heart are cut on the corner with the boys, a corner where academic achievement is of little consequence and confers no status, and he marks time until he is sixteen when he can leave school and push the difficult ten year interlude out of his consciousness as rapidly as possible.

But whatever the utility or limitations of the middle class centered approach, it is evident that the picture of lower class culture which emerges when major features of middle class culture are used as a basic reference point bears the earmarks of its derivation. The implications of using dominant characteristics of one cultural system as the basis for description of another are clearly pointed
up by Benjamin Paul. When using the perceptual patterns of one cultural system to examine another, he writes, "...one system seems to dissolve or fragment the second system, so that the other group's ways of behaving and thinking appear as a...patchwork...". In consequence, most current treatments of lower class life describe it as "disorganized", fragmented, and full of strains. This is not to deny that there are elements of disorganization and strain in lower class life—as there are in middle and upper class life—but rather to suggest that much of the "disorganization" and conflict attributed to lower class culture derives from using a middle class baseline for perceiving and analyzing that culture.

An alternative approach conceptualizes lower class culture as a cultural system in its own right—with an integrity of its own, a characteristic set of practices, focal concerns, and ways of behaving that are meaningfully and systematically related to one another, rather than to corresponding features of middle class culture.

**Some Characteristics of the Urban Lower Class Community:** All Americans, and particularly workers in the field of social welfare, are familiar with a type of urban community generally referred to as a "slum", "depressed area", or "underprivileged area". Despite this familiarity, such communities are generally not

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2. Several authors have pointed out the misleading implications of characterizing the lower class community as "disorganized". Among these are Norris, A., "A Critique of R. Faris, 'Social Disorganization'", paper given at American Sociological Society Meetings, 1947; and Rozid, J., "Differential Residential Mobility in Boston", M.A. Thesis, Boston University, 1954, Chapter IV. Rozid made a careful study of residential mobility in a supposedly highly mobile lower class community, and found that the great majority of locale changes were from one part of the same district to another, and did not disrupt the well-established interactional networks of community residents.

3. There is no claim that the present analysis does not also bear the earmarks of a middle class centered perceptual starting point. It represents rather an initial attempt to approach this culture type from a less middle class centered position. This attempt has evident limitations, but is at least a start in a direction which should be pursued further.
pictured as representing a reasonably persisting and ordered way of life, but rather as "disorganized", "blighted", or "decay"—terms denoting breakdown, disorder, and pathology. One reason for this, as mentioned above, is that observers tend implicitly to compare what they see with an image of a stable, wealthier middle class community, so that the features of the "slum" area are perceived as defective or pathological variants of "conventional" forms. Detailed descriptive studies of "slum" communities, however, reveal that they embody highly "organized" patterns of life with many systematic and persisting features. Only a few of these can be mentioned here.¹

The cultural system briefly and selectively described in this section represents one subtype of lower class urban culture. American lower class culture, in common with the cultures of all large social groupings, is far from homogeneous and comprises a substantial range of subtypes. Since no systematic mapping of the subtypes or included variants of lower class culture has been done, it is impossible to know precisely just how prevalent, in relation to other forms of lower class culture, is the variant cited here. It is possible that future research based on the relative frequency in various groups of a set of defining attributes of lower class culture (involvement in "unskilled" occupations; female-based household; serial mating; use of non-school grammatical system; frequency of involvement in certain forms of illegal activity; customary termination of formal schooling at age sixteen; peer group superseding family as primary

¹ Few good descriptive studies of lower class communities are available. Exceptions include Hollingshead, A., "Cultural Characteristics of the (Lower Class)" in Eitzen's Youth, New York, Wiley, 1949, pp.110-120; White, W., "Street Corner Society", Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943; and Thrasher, F., "The Gang", Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936. Value systems of adult and adolescent urban lower class groups are described in Miller, W., "Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency", The Journal of Social Issues, Vol.14, 1958; some characteristics of adolescent street-corner groups are described in Miller, W., "The Impact of a Community Group Work Program on Delinquent Corner Groups", The Social Service Review, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, December 1957. The bulk of substantive data on which these and the present report are based was derived from intensive field
reference group, etc.) would reveal at least four to six major subtypes. American lower class culture is a product of extremely complex historical origins, closely related to the pattern of major ethnic migrations. Depending on whether it is urban, suburban, or rural, its regional location (e.g., Deep South, Northeast, Far West), its size, locale, or section in a metropolitan area, the way of life of the community may reflect in varying degrees and combinations features of the culture of the Irish peasant, the African tribesman, the English urban proletarian, the Italian villager, the European Jewish ghetto-dweller, the early American frontiersman, and others. It is the thesis of this paper that from these extremely diverse and heterogeneous origins (with, however, certain common features), there is emerging a relatively homogeneous and stabilized native American lower class culture; however, in many communities the process of fusion is as yet in its earlier phases, and evidences of the original ethnic or locality culture are still strong. This is especially true for the more recently arrived and/or less socially mobile ethnic groups.¹

For the middle class individual, the "family"—composed of a legally married adult man and woman, living with their immature offspring in a dwelling unit which generally contains neither other families nor collateral kin—constitutes a unit of major psychic and structural importance. The child is reared in a milieu in which both a male and female parent are expected to assume directed and consistent

¹ The subtype of lower class urban culture treated here is one in which Irish and Negro influences predominate, and Italian, Jewish, and other ethnic influences are less evident. In lower class Jewish culture the family tends to remain a much more significant unit, and in Italian culture the role of the father differs from the pattern described here. However, evidence that peer relations become increasingly important relative to kin ties the farther one goes from the immigrant generation is presented in Gans, H., "The Peer Group Society" (Harvard Center for Community Studies Report, 1958) based on a study of a present-day lower class Italian community.
responsibility for the child's upbringing; the adolescent goes through a period of "rebellion" during which his family serves as a "negative reference group"—many family values and precepts become the object of intense concern through the "negative" device of appearing to reject them; adults—male and female—conceptualize their most cherished and deep-rooted life goals in relation to "the family", with the well-being, good name, and internal solidarity of this unit constituting a dominant life focus.

In the urban lower class community, one prevalent form (although by no means the only form) of child-rearing unit is the female-based household. This unit may be defined as one in which a male acting in the "father" role is either absent from the household, only sporadically present, or when present, only minimally or inconsistently involved in the support and raising of children. It usually consists of one or more females of child-bearing age, frequently related to one another by blood or marriage ties, and often includes two or more generations of women; e.g., the mother and/or aunt of the principal child-bearing female.\(^1\) Associated with the "female-based" household is the "serial monogamy" mating pattern in which a woman of child-bearing age has a succession of temporary mates, ranging from two to six or more, during her procreative years.

Little research has been conducted on the female-based household, so that its actual prevalence is not known. Evidently, it is varying in different types of lower class communities, depending on ethnicity (more prevalent among Negroes and Irish; less among Italians and Jews), locality (urban-suburban-rural), region (Deep South, Northeast, etc.), and other factors. Available

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1. The female-based household is a stabilized form in many societies—frequently associated with polygamy—and is found in 21% of world societies. (Murdock, G., "World Ethnographic Sample", American Anthropologist, Vol. 59, No. 4, 1957, pp. 675–686.) The American female-based household, estimated to comprise between .25 to .40 of urban lower class child-rearing units, exerts an influence proportionately greater than its statistical frequency, since the values and cultural emphases associated most directly with this unit set a standard of "high-prestige" behavior for many individuals—especially males—raised in the .60 to .75 of urban lower class child-rearing units which are not female-based households.
information indicates that a minimum of approximately 15%, or 25 million child-
rearing units in the United States are female-based, and that the percentage ranges
between 25% and 40% for "slum" areas of large cities.¹ The female-based household
is thus a widely prevalent and persisting structural form, and cannot be considered
simply a "broken" variant of the middle class family type. "Broken" implies a
male parent as an expected member of the household, whereas for most female-based
units there is little actual expectation (although frequently much expressed hope)
of this. Evidence indicates that this type of unit is functionally related to
the demands of the lower class occupational system and thus appears highly resis-
tant to change—either through "natural" processes or directed effort.

Being raised in a female-based household has important implications for the
personality of both male and female offspring. Since the sex-based division of
labor generally found in the middle class family (father—primary responsibility
for obtaining basic income, minor domestic maintenance and repair tasks, pur-
chase and maintenance of car; mother—primary responsibility for child care, pur-
chase of food and material goods, food preparation, cleaning, entertaining) cannot
be maintained in the female-based unit, the adult women must be able to engage
in a set of activities and to some degree manifest attributes generally associated
with the male in the middle class household. The adolescent girl frequently main-
tains close contact with a male street-corner group, and goes through a period
of attempting to model her behavior after that of the boys—adopting similar
patterns in dress, language, and stress on the "masculine" qualities of toughness,
fighting prowess, and "hardness". The adult woman, in light of the undependable
presence of a male in the household and the serial mating pattern, must be pre-
pared to assume and re-assume the roles of mate-seeker, mother, and employee in
recurring succession, rather than as fairly distinct and non-repetitive phases

¹ Source of statistics given in footnote one, page 19.
as is the case for most middle class women. The necessity of being prepared to assume a mate-seeking role places the adult mother, in this respect, in competition with her adolescent daughter, and mother and daughter often relate to one another more as peers than as parent and child. The "peer" quality of the mother-daughter relationship also derives from the fact that older daughters must learn at an early age to assume aspects of the "mother" role for their younger siblings.

The boy raised in a female-based household faces problems of sex-role identification which have important bearing on the emphases of lower class male culture, the form and functions of the "gang" or street-corner group, and the nature and durability of adult mating patterns. The boy's mother, through her own life experience, generally regards men as unreliable and untrustworthy; the definition "All men are no good" is common. Sensing the permanence and undependability of a marital relationship with an adult male, the mother focuses on her own son as a primary object of love and nurturance. In consequence, the mother-son relationship is one of great emotional significance, and probably the most important kin tie in this subcultural system.\(^1\) The mother strives to maintain a solitary relationship with her son, and to prevent him from assuming attributes of the adult male which she perceives as "no good". This situation has several implications for the boy's personality. On the one hand, he regards his relationship with his mother as "sacred", seldom derogating or condemning her openly, while frequently blaming or expressing hostility to "the old man"; he ascribes his successes to her, and regrets his transgressions primarily for her sake. On the other hand, the boy tends to internalize his mother's definition of men as "no good", and when as an adult he engages in the customary behavior patterns of his male peers, sees this as proof of his innate "weakness" or "badness", and in castigating himself will reflect the anticipated censure of his

\(^{1}\) Hollingshead reports that "The mother-child relationship is the strongest and most enduring family tie" in the lower class community of a medium sized midwestern city. (Hollingshead, A., 1949, op. cit., p.117.)
mother—"You turned out just like your father after all".

An important set of occupational roles customarily filled by lower class men (e.g., fireman, logger, policeman, mine worker, truck driver, "high-steel" construction worker, stevedore, deep-sea fisherman) require in varying combinations and to varying degrees physical strength, endurance and skill; the capacity to interact effectively with a group of males; the courage and will to face physical danger and vie with male antagonists, and the ability to adapt rapidly and resourcefully to situations involving risk and unpredictable eventualities (e.g., fire fighting, log jam, pursuit of criminal, mine cave-in, skyscraper construction, storm at sea) frequently coupled with the capacity to undergo long periods either of repetitive, "mechanical" tasks or of "waiting around" between task demands. Although there are many occupational roles customarily filled by lower class men which ordinarily demand few or none of the more "masculine" of these qualities (e.g., assembly line worker, delivery man, short-order cook, janitor, bus boy), the concept of what comprises estimable "masculine" behavior is widely prevalent among all occupational groups, and it is significant that many lower class males whose occupational roles do not involve the elements of risk, physical prowess, collective male interaction, and adapting to the unpredictable which characterize the more "masculine" roles, frequently engage in a set of extracoccupational activities which do involve these elements (the night "on the town" with drinking, women-seeking, and fighting; "tough" athletic activities; gambling activities such as card playing and betting on numbers and horse-races). These widespread emphases of lower class male culture may represent in part a "lag" or holdover from historical periods when there were relatively fewer industrial-connected roles, and relatively more roles involving hunting, combat, and "pioneer" activities.

For the lower class boy raised in a female-based household, the fact that his earliest primary object of identification and learning model was a woman poses
a problem in acquiring the tough "masculine" qualities associated with the adult male role. A major device for accommodating to this problem is the male adolescent street-corner group, or "gang". Most boys from female-based households at a fairly early age adopt as their primary reference group and learning milieu a set of peers raised under similar circumstances.\(^1\) This highly prevalent type of group maintains a well-developed set of standards and concerns which reflect the basic emphases of male lower class culture.\(^2\) These include a strong emphasis on intragroup loyalty and cooperation ("squealing" or otherwise letting your buddies down is the major sin of the corner group); a stress on "toughness" (manifested by physical prowess, fighting ability, stamina and courage, the willingness to take risks, and a complete avoidance of identification or association with anything seen as "soft" or effeminate); a definition of women as objects of conquest; stress on "smartness" (manifested by skill in mutual insult interchange and adeptness in gambling games); a strain towards "adultness" and the avoidance of "kid stuff", and much concern with honesty, trustworthiness, and justice in relation to fellow group members, counterbalanced by admiration of the capacity to outsmart, dupe, or "con" appropriate outgroup members.\(^3\)

Although the corner group serves multiple functions in lower class culture, in this one respect, at least, it constitutes a highly useful device for enabling the male child to accommodate to a discrepancy between the conditions of early

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1. Socialization in a female-based household is not postulated as the only factor in the genesis of the "gang"; boys raised in households where the father plays a more important role also become "gang" members—e.g., in Italian families. The aim here is to show the functional interrelation of the street-corner group and female-based household in communities where these units are prevalent.

2. Six major "focal concerns" of lower class culture are cited and discussed in Miller, W., 1953, op. cit.

3. It is of significance that the major cultural emphases and learned skills of the street-corner group are extremely close to those that characterize a successful infantry squad under combat conditions.
socialization and the demands of the adult male role. Thus the frequent statement "The gang is a product of the broken home" represents a partial but vastly oversimplified truth; the existence of the street-corner group is related to the female-based household and serial mating pattern, but the basic values and emphases of the corner group articulate directly with many other features of lower class culture, and themselves serve to perpetuate the qualities and conditions which maintain the serial mating pattern and female-based household.

The one-sex peer group is a unit of great importance for females as well as males. We have already referred to the female adolescent corner group—a prevalent although smaller and shorter-lived unit than the male. But the one-sex group is important for women as well, although the adult female primary group tends to a greater degree to include non-peer kin as well as kin and non-kin peers. The women's back-fence gossip group, the morning coffee-break group, the Saturday night "party" group, the informal women's "club", are prevalent and culturally distinctive. In many instances such groups exert effective pressure on members not to disrupt group solidarity by maintaining a husband-wife household, just as male groups pressure members to exhibit primary loyalty to the "gang" rather than to the "old lady".

It is evident that each type of peer group cited here—the male adolescent, female adolescent, male adult and female adult—has its counterpart in middle class society. But the fact the middle and lower class peer groupings may exhibit some external resemblance should not obscure the fact that the peer group as a significant structural form and focus of psychic reference is substantially more important relative to the family in the lower class community. The social structure of this subtype of urban lower class culture might be schematically pictured as comprising a set of age-graded one-sex peer groups which constitute a major psychic focus and reference group for those over twelve or thirteen. Men and women of mating age leave these groups periodically to form temporary marital
alliances, but these tend to lack stability, and after varying periods of involvement in the father-mother family arrangement, gravitate back to the same-sex peer group. Workers in this type of community should take these factors into account in assessing the feasibility of reconstituting a "broken" home as a major treatment objective.

**Extent of Lower Class Culture:** How prevalent is the way of life described here, and what portion of our total population can be considered "lower class"? If the lower class population constitutes a relatively small portion of our population, and is becoming smaller, this has one set of implications for social welfare policy; if, on the other hand, it is a relatively large proportion, and not becoming smaller, this has different implications.

The following table shows what proportion of the population is included under certain educational, occupational, and income categories. Each statistic furnishes an index to what can be considered different subgroups within lower class culture. For example—the percentage of U.S. adults who have not finished high school (60%) furnishes an index to those who are almost certainly not middle (or upper) class, since attendance at college is a virtual requirement of middle class status; the percentage of individuals in the labor force holding "unskilled" occupations (25-30%) is a good indication of how many follow the way of life associated with "unskilled" work. None of these statistics furnishes direct evidence as to the size of the lower class defined in terms of specified behavior patterns, since no research based on such patterns has been reported, but they give as good an indirect indication as is currently available.¹

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Individual or Group</th>
<th>Approximate % of Population</th>
<th>Year or Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults (over 25) in U.S. who did not complete high school.</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in U.S. civilian labor force in &quot;semi-skilled&quot; and &quot;unskilled&quot; positions.</td>
<td>.40- .50</td>
<td>1910-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household heads in large Northern cities who did not enter high school.</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer units in U.S. with annual incomes under $3,000.</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in U.S. civilian labor force in &quot;unskilled&quot; positions.</td>
<td>.25- .30</td>
<td>1930-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer units in U.S. with annual incomes under $2,000.</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>1954</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household units in large U.S. cities reporting female household head.</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Is the size of our lower class population, as indicated by these statistics, increasing or decreasing? This is difficult to answer, since trends show considerable fluctuation, especially in areas such as income, where the value of the dollar and wage scale have changed greatly in recent years. The relative proportion of non-"skilled" labor in the labor force has remained surprisingly stable. Between 1910 and 1940 this proportion changed only 3% (50% to 47% of labor force). Although some evidence points to a relative decline in "unskilled" categories as mechanization and automation proceed, there is no good evidence for any substantial reduction in the proportion of the overall lower class population. It is evident, however, that the absolute size of this group has increased as the general population has grown.

The existence of a stabilized and growing urban lower class is related, along with other factors, to changes in immigration patterns in this country.\(^1\) As each

\(^1\) Patterns of ethnic immigration and social mobility are reported in detail by Oscar Handlin; see, especially, "The Uprooted", Boston, Little Brown, 1951.
successive immigrating ethnic group—English, German, Irish, Italian, Jewish—became established in this country, a portion of each group aspired to "better" itself through concerted effort, and in the space of several generations achieved essentially middle class status. Another portion of each group, however, lacked either the incentive or capacity to relinquish certain behavior patterns characteristic of European peasant and urban lower class cultures. This portion—with proportions differing according to the ethnic group—"stayed behind" in the central areas of the cities as their more ambitious and industrious compatriots moved to the outlying middle class residential areas, becoming the core of a "stabilized" lower class population which gives little evidence of any substantial tendency to alter its social status. With the virtual cessation of immigration, the reservoir of potentially upwardly-mobile ethnic groupings is no longer being replenished, and those who "stayed behind" in the city "slum" areas now comprise a population with a stabilizing culture which is increasing in size through births rather than immigration.

A current exception is the situation of the Negroes, along with those few ethnic groupings, such as Puerto Ricans, whose immigration peak is recent. The present position of the Negroes in respect to class movement resembles that of the earlier immigrant groups; although the Negroes as a whole were among the very earliest groups to migrate to this country, strictures against their free social movement blocked them from the attempt to attain middle class status which characterized earlier generations of other ethnic immigrants. With these strictures gradually being relaxed, much of the Negro population, especially in the urban North, is currently undergoing the lower-class middle-class "separating out" process earlier experienced by groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews, and much upward aspiration and class movement characterizes the Negro population at present. However, as the result of restrictions on upward social movement, the current class distribution of the Negro is disproportionately weighted toward
lower class; in 1940, about 80% of all Negroes were culturally lower class in contrast to about 40% of whites.¹

To what extent do different individuals in various types of lower class communities aspire to elevate their social status through educational opportunities, job advancement, and other means? It is widely held that the majority of lower class people want to change their class position, but are impeded from so doing primarily by the accident of unfortunate circumstance. This view is open to serious question. There are undoubtedly many who do so aspire, especially in the ethnic groups previously cited. But there is also a substantial number who manifest little realistic upward aspiration. We can distinguish, on a gross level, three kinds of youngsters in lower class communities: 1) Those who, through family and other influences, are motivated to change their social status, and who have the personal equipment to effect this change; 2) those who aspire to change, but lack the necessary training and capacities; 3) those who have no realistic aspiration to effect any significant change in their social status. The first type has traditionally utilized and will continue to utilize the help of social welfare services; the second is a conflicted individual who frequently becomes the concern of social agencies as an emotional problem; the third, as he grows older, has little direct contact with most social agencies, nor does he seek them out. The fact that most social workers have had greater experience with the first two types has resulted in a tendency to underestimate the frequency of the third, and to assume that most lower class people either have definite social mobility aspirations, or are troubled and disturbed. The third type, representing a "stable" lower class culture, is far more prevalent than commonly supposed, and its existence poses a major problem for social work.

¹ Drake, S. and Gayton, H., "Black Metropolis", New York, Harcourt Brace, 1945, especially Chapter V, and U.S. Senate Committee on Low-Income Families, 1955, op. cit., p. 157. This situation contributes to the widespread fallacy of attributing to race certain behavior patterns (crime, illegitimacy, etc.) which in fact are attributable to class.
Lower Class Culture and Social Work Practice

It is the thesis of this paper that there is a substantial segment of present-day American society whose way of life, values, and characteristic patterns of behavior are the product of a distinctive cultural tradition which may be termed "lower class". The size of this group is not decreasing; its most characteristic behavior patterns are not appreciably modified by rising income levels; its potential for upward social movement is substantially inhibited by a set of built-in cultural mechanisms which impede significant modification of class-related behavior patterns; the major outline of its cultural tradition, rather than becoming closer to that of the middle class, is becoming progressively more stabilized and distinctive.

If we accept the validity of this thesis—or even its partial validity—what are its implications for social work practice? They are many and fundamental, and only a very few can be mentioned here. These relate to the way the social worker perceives and defines "social problems" for this group; his capacity to achieve genuine emotional acceptance of characteristic lower class behavior; and the broad and complex question of proper or appropriate objectives in working with lower class communities, groups, or cases.

Emotional Acceptance of Culturally-derived Behavior: The principle "start where the client is" implies, among other things, an initial emotional acceptance of certain attitudes and behaviors of clients which may appear distasteful to the worker because of values derived from his own social background. Any trained worker knows that such emotional acceptance is extremely hard to attain; that it frequently takes great effort to conceal personal reactions to conditions which may arouse shock or disgust, but that despite this difficulty, effective practice depends on continued effort to handle these reactions. It should be apparent that such outward acceptance would be especially important when dealing with lower class clients, who are frequently hypersensitive to actions or attitudes which might
indicate "snobbery" or feelings of disdain for those of "lower" status.

The fact that the client may, on the surface, appear to share many of the values of the social worker can be deceptive. Most lower class individuals are well aware of what are considered "conventional" values, and, motivated by feelings of shame over admitting "true" feelings or actual behavior to the worker, may use this knowledge to deceive the worker into thinking that they share the same premises as to "right" behavior, whereas in reality the client feels his behavior is being negatively criticized.

Those who wish to work effectively with cultural groups outside our own society must learn to deal with their emotional reactions to cultural practices such as polygamy, bride-price, or polytheism, and this is not easy. But it is considerably easier to manifest "tolerance" for the ways of the Zulu, Navaho or Burmese than to achieve emotional acceptance of features of lower class culture in our own society; in the former case it is relatively easy to recognize that disapproved or exotic behavior is a direct product of the group's culture, and to accept such behavior on the grounds that it is "their way" of doing things, a way which is different from ours. But in the case of lower class culture, there is an almost automatic tendency to view certain customary behaviors in terms of right and wrong, and to explain them as blameworthy deviations from accepted moral standards rather than as products of a deep-rooted cultural tradition. It is not too difficult to view the device of polygamous marriage and the mother-centered household among the Zulus as one alternative arrangement for meeting the problem of marriage and child-rearing; it is much harder to see the practice of serial mating and the female-based household in our own society as social forms which may constitute a practical or effective adaptation to the milieu in which they are found.

There is no attempt here to advocate a completely morality-free approach to such features; this is evidently neither possible nor desirable; what is suggested
is a much more directed and conscientious effort to view the features of lower class culture as interrelated aspects of an essentially adaptive way of life, deeply rooted in a persisting tradition.\textsuperscript{1} The corner boy does not persist in "delinquency" nor the mother in serial marriage out of stubbornness or a willful desire to violate known moral standards, but because their whole inner system of personal security is dependent on the maintenance of the life pattern of which these features form an integral part. In dealing with behavioral areas which involve these cultural patterns, the worker must maintain an intelligent respect for their positive function for the individual and the extent to which they mutually support one another.\textsuperscript{2}

**Defining "Social Problems" for the Lower Class Client:** One important subtype of lower class culture has been described as a way of life whose various features are systematically interrelated. The female-based household, serial marriage, the one-sex peer group as a major unit, the stress on "toughness" and "masculinity" in male culture, the demands of the male occupational role, the "readiness" of women to engage in mating and occupational activity--these and other features are pictured as mutually self-supporting and related to one another to form a way of life which constitutes a reasonably effective adaptation to a prevalent social milieu, and contributes importantly to the total society of which it forms a part. The fact that these behavior patterns are both interrelated and adaptive has important implications for the way in which "social problems" are perceived and analyzed.

In the first place, it is vital to distinguish between what are really problems

\textsuperscript{1} In recent years social work has moved toward a policy of "cultural pluralism"--viz., maintaining a respect for the integrity and values of different ethnic-based cultures; it has not as yet adopted a similar policy of permissiveness and respect for social-class based cultures.

\textsuperscript{2} Many social workers working with lower class clients are well aware of the "adaptive" nature of certain behavior patterns, and exhibit sensitivity and discretion in dealing with them. For example--direct attempts to inhibit "acting out" of aggressive impulses by fighting or roughhousing may be considered inadvisable, or the presence in a household of a "common law" spouse may be seen as a positive factor under certain circumstances.
in the lower class community, and what appear to be problems due to an implicit comparison with features of middle class culture. Many terms commonly used to refer to prevalent features of lower class culture contain a "built-in" cultural bias, which cause an observed feature or behavior pattern automatically to appear "deviant" or pathological as soon as it is described. For example—the female-based household is generally called a "broken home"; the serial monogamy marriage pattern is termed "desertion"; certain social arrangements of lower class communities are called "community disorganization"; the widespread and highly functional adolescent street-corner group is termed the "delinquent gang"; behavior in active conformity with standards of the individual's most immediate and significant reference groups is called "anti-social". In evaluating or diagnosing a given set of attitudes or behavior patterns, the question should first be asked, "To what extent does this pattern of behavior represent customary or expected behavior in the client's home community?" rather than using as a comparative baseline an image of "normal" behavior derived from other cultural milieux. For example—if a female client appears to manifest a high degree of hostility towards men, it is most important in determining how "abnormal" this is to know whether she comes from a cultural background where the concept of men as "no good" represents a prevalent attitude; if the degree of hostility appears greatly beyond what would be expected in this milieu, then a diagnosis of abnormal would be tenable. If a client appears to manifest insufficient "guilt" responses on the birth of an illegitimate child, it is most important to know whether she was reared in a community where little real stigma was attached to having a child when unmarried; in this instance, similar levels of guilt manifestation for a lower class client and a middle class client would have very different meanings for each.

A second point relates to the feasibility and methods of effecting changes in behavior patterns which clearly constitute "problems" for the lower class client or community. The basic values and emphases of lower class culture produced a vast
army of woodsman, construction workers, cattlemen, Indian fighters, frontier women, and many others without whose labors our country would never have achieved its present strength. Perhaps even more important—the safety and survival of any large modern nation depends on the extent to which it can, in time of war, put into the field a group of men whose qualities of endurance, courage, capacity to outwit the enemy, ability to operate as part of a "squad", and skill in facing other men in direct combat will enable that nation to achieve victory. As we have seen, it is precisely these qualities and abilities which constitute the major emphases of lower class male culture and which, in fact, comprise the basic set of qualities and skills learned and practiced in the "gang".

Thus, one by-product of lower class culture has been the development of a set of behavioral characteristics and life patterns which have been extremely useful, or "functional" in the growth and survival of our society. Another by-product of the same set of emphases is a set of behaviors which are seen as disruptive, pathological, or dysfunctional. These include certain forms of adult crime, much juvenile delinquency, bearing more children than a household can effectively support, "problem" drinking and fighting, and others. One question which arises concerns the possibility of removing the motivational sources which nurture "problem" behavior without at the same time weakening the bases of "useful" forms of behavior. Many elementary school teachers wage a constant battle against certain forms of behavior manifested by lower class boys; the boys generally resist these efforts with much vigor; it is at least possible that the boys reflect a deeper wisdom in attempting to conserve a set of skills and attributes which they sense have been

1. Recent developments in the field of warfare and "automated" combat techniques, as well as a persisting hope that there will be no further wars and thus no need for "combat" qualities, may mean that the qualities cited here are becoming less realistically necessary. However, cultivation of such qualities has been essential to our nation at least up to 1945, and there is little doubt that the system of cultural devices which nurture these qualities will change much more slowly than the need for them.
or will be useful to themselves and to the larger society.

This is not to minimize the extent to which there are serious "problems"—both for individuals and groups—in lower class communities. There is much human suffering, difficulty in achieving an integrated life pattern, mental illness, and disturbance among social groups undergoing rapid social change. Just as middle class society—with its strong emphases on ambition, hard work, orderliness, achievement and success—can produce individuals who are emotionally overcommitted to these concerns and may develop obsessive-compulsive or other forms of neuroses, so the conditions and emphases of lower class life can produce individuals who cannot effectively accommodate to cultural emphases on aggressive masculinity or mating readiness or for whom the conditions of child-rearing result in severe problems of dependency and affection deprivation leading to emotional and social disturbance. What is important is to evaluate manifestations of pathology in lower class individuals or groups against the total background of lower class culture; such a perspective should be of considerable aid to the social worker in two ways: first, it should lighten his already tremendous burden by the realization that there is not as much pathology in lower class life as is commonly supposed, and second, it should facilitate the problem of treatment by clarifying the cultural sources of the pathology and indicating more directly the nature of feasible treatment goals.

Defining Treatment Goals: Perhaps the most fundamental and at the same time most difficult problem faced by social workers working with lower class clients or communities concerns objectives. What are, or should be, our treatment goals when working with those whose behavior and values are products of lower class culture? This question must be faced both by the case worker working with a lower class individual or family, and the community worker in such fields as urban renewal, community organization, and city planning. A great range of highly complicated and ramified issues—moral, practical, and legal—are involved in this question, and it is raised here primarily to stress the importance of facing it directly
rather than to undertake the monumental task of trying to answer it.

During the earlier years of social work, objectives of workers in lower class communities were fairly clear. Given a large reservoir of recently arrived immigrants motivated by an intense desire to acquire knowledge and skills that would enable them to become real "Americans", social work agencies, and the settlement houses in particular, provided a lever for facilitating this desire by introducing these ambitious people to the essential behavior patterns of middle class society. Today conditions are greatly altered. If we grant that there are at least 25 million people in our present society who follow an established lower class cultural tradition and who manifest little real motivation for moving "upward", a goal which arises directly from the "felt needs" of the population is no longer "given" the worker, and he must face the question—"What should be my goal in working with the lower class client?". "What picture do I have of a 'healthy' or desirable way of life for these people?"

Let us first cite two logically extreme alternatives. The first is to help people alter established lower class modes of behaving so that they can aspire to and adopt an essentially middle class pattern of life. The second is to accept the fact of an established lower class culture and adopt the objective of enabling people to adjust effectively to their own social class tradition. On a broad policy level, both of these alternatives involve substantial difficulties. A major impediment to the objective of facilitating the adoption of "conventional" or middle class behavior concerns the matter of feasibility. Even if this goal were explicitly accepted as desirable—and there are obviously many possible reservations as to its desirability—how possible is it? If the behavior patterns of this group are as well entrenched and mutually supported as they appear, effecting appreciable changes in a significant portion of the population would be a monumental task. Clinical psychiatry has been notably unsuccessful in significantly modifying behavior patterns of lower class patients, even with the concentrated case focus this method permits. The feasibility of facilitating passage to middle class status for the 25 million "hard core" lower class people in this country would evidently be well beyond the capacity of social work as currently organized. The second alternative—that of helping the individual
whose behavior deviates from customary lower class practice to better "adjust" to his cultural milieu--also presents difficulties. Were social workers to adopt this objective as explicit policy, they would risk being accused of helping to perpetuate the present social class situation--an objective which, if stated as official policy, runs counter to official American values.

On a day-to-day working basis, it is evident that these two postulated objectives--stated here as logical extremes rather than as realistic choice alternatives--do not appear to constitute a real procedural dilemma. Social work in general has not directly faced this problem by stating that a basic practice objective is that of "enabling" those individuals who come to the social worker of their own accord seeking help to achieve the way of life they themselves desire, without passing direct judgment on the value of these client-determined objectives. This type of formulation, however, does not free social work from the responsibility of facing the problem posed by lower class culture. Whether it is admitted directly or not, social work action by its very nature exerts a direct influence on the direction people's lives will take. Means and ends cannot be considered separately; means become ends, and the cumulative actions of many workers can contribute substantially to producing a determinable set of social conditions. The individual worker, concerned with "immediate" treatment goals in attempting to alleviate the suffering of an unwed mother, to find a placement for a Negro-White baby, or to help a frightened youngster to "stay out of trouble", may feel that his goals are clear and rise directly from the client's immediate "needs"; however, his whole perception of what these "needs" are must rest on an implicit assumption of a "proper" solution for this specific problem, and this picture must be derived from a concept of "long-term" goals, which necessarily involve a picture of a certain kind of social order, and a certain set of valued behaviors. The existence of an established lower class culture confronts social work with the necessity of coming to grips directly with these difficult issues, if it is to attain a clearly defined and positive role in relation to the larger society.
Title of Paper: SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESENT-DAY DELINQUENCY OF RELEVANCE TO EDUCATORS

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