An Experiential Introduction to Social Systems

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The concept of a social system, integrated with practice and related to a number of different social groupings, is an essential element in any program of education for the "indigenous care-giving personnel"* available to a comprehensive community mental health program.

This article reports on one of 28 four-hour sessions in the fifth annual series of a continuing education program for clergymen held at the Menninger Foundation in co-operation with the local agency for comprehensive mental health services. Participants were local clergymen who had responded to a program announcement and had completed a written application form. Applicants were seen in individual interviews to perfect a "contract for learning"; they paid a tuition fee of $100 or re-

*"Indigenous care-giving personnel" is a phrase chosen to identify the mental health significance of clergymen in a community and to permit generalizations from experience to others similarly identifiable. "Indigenous" indicates existence of the group in the community previous to and apart from any institutionalized mental health effort; "care-giving" designates those who are characteristically expected to provide caring services to persons or groups. "Care-giving services" is the most inclusive conceivable category; it is used to describe all services, from the most informal to the most skilled and professional. "Personnel" indicates that these persons are socially validated in their care-giving roles by some affiliative or established structure or organization of which they are the personnel.

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ceived a scholarship from mental health agency funds. The Rev. Richard Bollinger, staff clergyman in the Division of Religion and Psychiatry, has been co-ordinator of the series from its beginning.

Although important to community mental health education, the social-system concept suffers from embarrassing richness, theoretical complexity, sometimes trite superficiality in popularization, a too restricted application to nuclear family systems. Thus there is a fourfold educational problem in introducing the concept. It must be conveyed as a familiar concept based in already established experiences, but richly extensible to unfamiliar materials; it must be confirmed by its immediate relevance for problem-solving, but remain general enough to be relevant in a large number of additional situations. This educational problem must be solved within a fractional-time seminar from which, although available motivations have been actively integrated with program planning, disgruntled, bored, or anxious participants can withdraw without significant extrinsic penalty.

Such strategic and tactical considerations led to the development of a simulation script and observation guide for an experience involving an activity with pleasant recreational associations, yet one that could present some of the basic data of a social-system theory for inductive learning. The remainder of this article reports on the effort and its results.

*The Introduction to Social System Concept*

Introductory Statement to the Seminar Participants: Welcome back to Monday afternoon work [after a one-week Christmas holiday]. Today should be informative and important, also exciting and fun. We begin consideration of a useful technical idea that extends and sharpens some ordinary and familiar observations you have all already made in your everyday life and in your work as pastors. The idea to be presented is the concept of a social system. [Write “social system” on the blackboard].

A “social system” is a very inclusive term that properly describes any cluster of two or more persons who interact over some span of time.