Hard Hats vs. Soft Hearts: The Conflict between Principles and Reality in Child and Adolescent Care and Treatment Programs

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ABSTRACT: Much of child care involves quick reactions based on one’s “automatic pilot” derived from how we were parented. This paper is about two seemingly universal “automatic pilot” systems—the “hard hats” and the “soft hearts.” “Hard hats” are behavior management and modification oriented, while “soft hearts” are psychodynamically and counselling oriented. Typically, the “hard hats” tend to have the upper hand due to the nature of our culture, and they therefore have the effect of preventing the contributions of the “soft hearts” from being realized. That all too frequently sets up a dominant culture and a resentful minority situation. To correct this imbalance, a value orientation “from the top” which emphasizes mutual respect and utilization is suggested.

Working in settings providing basic care, management, and perhaps enculturation and/or treatment to groups of children or adolescents for significant segments of time is one of the most complex, demanding and challenging undertakings of all. It is also one of the most important, a fact which is all too often not reflected in the funding and organizational arrangements of such programs. It is also not often reflected in the degree of development of professional theory, practice, standards, and training for the broad field of endeavors loosely subsumed under the rubric of “child care”. Frequently, therefore, the individuals who engage in such activities are selected on the basis of pragmatics such as willingness to work under severely demanding and minimally rewarding circumstances out of a “desire to work with kids” motivation. The “training” the individuals receive is then largely

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"flying by the seat of the pants," with or without some "at the elbow" and "formal staff development" sessions.

Given these circumstances, then, it is perhaps not surprising that the child worker often ends up operating out of his/her "automatic pilot" when confronted with the realities of direct work with children. This "automatic pilot" usually consists of "doing to others what was done unto us," replays of the ways one's own parents dealt with you on the one hand, and of a set of generalized moral-toned "principles and precepts" on the other. From three years of detailed recording and analysis of on-line child worker behavior for a book on child work (1), from seven years of intensive formal training of child workers for a certificate in child work (2), and from thirteen years of central involvement in child and adolescent day and residential treatment programs, it has been concluded that there are identifiable child worker "types" with different "automatic pilots" operating. This paper is devoted to the characteristics of two major such "automatic pilot" systems which commonly appear in the development of child workers and in the development of child agencies.

These "automatic pilot" systems are the "Hard Hats" and the "Soft Hearts." The two "camps" tend to be diametrically opposed on a number of dimensions and approaches, and they therefore tend to devote a great deal of energy to dealing with the other camp, to the detriment of the program and the children, to some extent at least. To make matters maximally clear-cut, the two camps will be described in rather polarized terms, even though actual individual workers are almost always more moderate and differentiated than the descriptions imply.

"Hard Hats"

Starting with the "Hard Hats," they tend to be externally oriented, coping-skill emphasizing, competence-building, conformity and control seeking, negative assumptive and presumptive, harm avoidant, consequence-relying, punishment and cost system emphasizing, rationalistic, simplistic, "mainstream-oriented," success and achievement encouraging, action-oriented, feeling-avoidant, other-directed, tunnel-visioned, short-term impact-seeking, product-emphasizing, pathology-oriented, blame-frame thinking, responsibility-emphasizing, performance-concerned, system protecting, behavior-and-attitude focused, and ideation-and-assessment avoidant "doers." They frequently become involved with such things as "manners," obedience, respect for