

REDUCING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING THROUGH PSYCHODRAMA

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One of the major problems faced by correctional counselors in the care and treatment of juvenile offenders in the institutional setting is that of the aggressive, assaultive ward. He presents unique difficulties in terms of control and adaptability, especially in the group living situation. As his behavior directly affects the behavior of his peers, his negative acting out exerts undue pressures upon the group as a whole. One actively aggressive ward introduced into a relatively placid group can and will create reactions and counter reactions on the part of both peers and counseling staff alike. In any institutional setting, especially one geared to the treatment of delinquent youth, the overly aggressive ward is to be expected, however unwelcome his presence may be. The problem has been to channel the aggressive behavior into acceptable behavior with the least amount of trauma, both physical and mental, towards the ward or towards his peers. Too often a ward exhibiting this type of behavior becomes involved in physical confrontations, assaults, and disruptive agitative actions before he has become fully integrated into his program. Normally this necessitates his removal from the group setting. However desirable the removal of a problem ward may be in terms of the group such action invariably creates discontinuity in the aggressive ward's treatment. In essence the problem is arbitrarily disposed of rather than confronted. "Pass the problem on to someone else" appears to be the general rule in dealing initially with this type of behavior. Threats of retaliatory or punitive action by staff or peers are generally ineffective at this juncture as such promises serve only to reinforce the testing mechanism, usually precipitating immediate and continued acting out.

The use of peer pressure as a means of control is of course utilized whenever possible, but this method of containment is only as effective as the strength of the group. A strong negatively oriented aggressive ward can contaminate a weak group to the point of chaos. The weaker wards may be reluctant to inform staff through fear of physical injury or may fear lack of control as other elements of the group actively support the aggressive ward in his behavior.

Group and individual counseling, together with behavior modification techniques, have met with varying degrees of success in dealing with behavior of this type; generally however, whatever gains are made become apparent only after long term exposure to the chosen method of treatment. The need for an effective method of initially dealing with the aggressive ward is only too apparent.

Physical restraint and removal from the group living situation are all too often used as the treatment of choice. At times this may be necessary for the protection of both the problem ward and the members of the group, yet in many cases such "treatment" is initiated simply because it is expedient.

With these thoughts in mind the possibility of utilizing psychodrama as a treatment tool in dealing with the aggressive ward became apparent based on four major assumptions:

1. Aggressive and assaultive impulses could be channelled in a controlled monitored setting allowing full expression without the danger of physical injury.
2. Motives behind these impulses could be explored in a manner readily visible to the wards involved.
3. Immediate catharsis could be achieved, reducing the probability of uncontrolled aggression and pressure in the group living situation.
4. Precipitating problems could be alleviated, examined, and explored as they occurred by a restaging of the problem in a psychodramatic setting.

The juvenile facilities of the Los Angeles County Probation Department at Camp Fenner Canyon, located in the San Gabriel mountains northeast of Los Angeles, provided an ideal location for testing the procedure under normal working conditions.

The camp is divided into four living groups, with dormitories of twenty four boys each. These boys range in age from sixteen to nineteen years and have been committed to the facility for a variety of offenses, for the most part those of a violent or assaultive nature. The dormitories are respectively; 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D'. 'A' residence, the orientation dormitory, is composed of new boys entering camp. Boys remain in this living group for approximately one month while completing testing and basic requirements before being assigned their permanent living group in one of the other dormitories for the balance of their stay.

As would be expected 'A' dormitory experiences a greater incidence of problems than do the others. All the wards are new to the camp and as they spend relatively little time in this setting a stable culture never adequately develops. Wards are most apt to test limits during this period of

their residency and engage in self assertive and destructive negative behavior. As a consequence 'A' dormitory in the past has generally had a higher percentage of disciplinary removals and runaways. The aggressive assaultive ward has contributed inordinately to the problem. His acting out often contributes directly to the runaway of a threatened younger and weaker peer, and ultimately results in his own removal if the behavior is not controlled. Psychodrama, it was felt, might well be the vehicle for this control.

Initially the psychodramatic approach as utilized in the 'A' dormitory setting was unscheduled. Sessions were initiated with problem wards and peers on a basis of immediate need, usually shortly after a precipitating incident or confrontation between the aggressive ward and peers or staff. This approach appeared to be most effective given the dormitory's particular ward make-up and program. Ward participation and acceptance of the psychodramatic technique varied directly with the time factor. The shorter the time between the precipitating event and the psychodramatic re-creation, the more cooperation and emotional involvement was found. This is not surprising, given the general short attention span and mercurial moods exhibited by a majority of the wards. Small groups seem to be more effective in maintaining interest and involvement, an optimum number being six or seven individuals. More than this number creates opportunities for disruption and grandstanding which destroys the effectiveness of the session. Input from an *audience* is desired but it has proved to be detrimental to the process on occasion unless this audience is directly involved in or has witnessed the precipitating event.

In the 'A' dormitory setting the psychodrama evolves from a group encounter following an incident. The transition from encounter to psychodrama has proved to be smooth when the number of individuals is small and the time lapse since the incident is short. The role of *director* is usually assumed by the involved staff although in cases of ward-staff confrontation a responsible ward or disinterested staff member may be utilized.

An examination of the case of David M. will serve as an example of the process in action.

DAVID M.

David M. is a Mexican-American youth of seventeen committed to Camp Fenner Canyon for murder. He is a large, heavysset boy, intensively gang oriented. His case files revealed a record of seventeen arrests ranging from assaults and robberies to the committing offense.

David entered 'A' dormitory reluctantly. His initial reaction to camp was negative in the extreme. Within three hours of entering the program he had managed to alienate virtually everyone in the dormitory, staff and peers

alike. His answer to every reasonable request was a resounding obscenity. The consensus of opinion by staff was that David should be removed to a security or "lock up" facility as soon as possible. This would probably have been initiated in short order had David not become involved in an incident with the reigning Chicano in the dormitory—Leon, a member of a rival gang. Staff intervened before blows were struck and David and five other wards were taken to the office for counseling. David was especially profane during the group meeting, admitting to no responsibility for the problem and declaring he was the victim of racial prejudice on the part of staff. Initially a confrontation technique was used; however, in David's case this proved to be unworkable for two basic reasons. David refused to accept any responsibility for his actions and the obvious hostility of both staff and wards created an atmosphere of tension which kept him constantly on the defensive. The feeling had been expressed that the meeting was only preparatory to David's prompt and permanent removal from the camp setting.

It was felt that perhaps the psychodramatic approach might prove effective in this case and the transition from encounter group to psychodrama was made by setting the stage for a reenactment of the confrontation between David and Leon. Initially a staff *auxiliary ego* played the part of Leon to alleviate the immediate volatile emotional climate.

David was seated in a chair, facing the staff member who assumed the *role* of the *other*, Leon.

DAVID: You bastards (*indicating the group as a whole*) are always messin' with me!

STAFF: Man, you come walking in here like some vato loco trying to prove how tough you are. What do you expect?

David does a double take and demands to know who staff is. Is he a staff member or is he supposed to be Leon? The ground rules are repeated indicating that what we are trying to accomplish is to relive the incident so that we can see what the problem is.

DAVID: How come that punk (*indicating Leon*) don't do it himself?

Leon becomes visibly agitated and starts to get out of his chair. He is waved back. Staff explains that because of the charged emotional atmosphere and raw feelings a substitute for Leon is being used. David is to regard the staff member as Leon for purposes of the psychodrama and respond to him accordingly. The initial confrontation is reviewed, the wards explaining that David had challenged Leon and that Leon had reacted by questioning David's right to enter the dormitory as a new boy and throw his weight around. Staff, assuming the *role* of Leon, picked it up from there.

STAFF: How come you think you're such a bad ass? You can't come walk-

ing in here talking all that crap and shoving people around. You better get your act together!

DAVID: Screw you man! You don't tell Mad Dog what to do or not to do!

STAFF: Mad Dog? Mad Dog? What does that mean Mad Dog? They usually put Mad Dogs to sleep. Everyone here knows where dogs come from.

Leon laughs from the sidelines as David balls up his fists and glares about him.

DAVID: I'm going to waste you puto! (*This is directed towards the vacant space halfway between staff and Leon.*)

The interchange continues for some minutes and is evidently a source of some satisfaction to David who begins to relax as he realizes that he can express himself verbally without fear of physical retaliation. Another ward, James, a black who has been in obvious delight over the exchange, is moved into position next to David to act as his *double*.

STAFF: I don't know how a punk like you stayed alive on the outs. If I'd seen you out there I would have brought back your cojones in a paper bag.

DAVID: (*Reddening at this reflection on his manhood, struggles with himself a moment before answering.*) At least I got cojones. You ain't nothing but a vieja, an old woman. You ain't nothing at all unless you got your homeboys around.

At this point James, who has obviously been anxious to participate, interjects as David's *double*.

JAMES: Yeah, you think you runnin' this dorm, tellin' everybody what to do all the time. You think you cool but you ain't crap!

David is somewhat taken aback at the unexpected support he has found and warms to his role. He begins to reflect on his statements picking up cues from James.

DAVID: Yeah, how come when I come in here all of a sudden you start giving orders? You ain't no better than me even if you been here longer.

Leon has been fidgeting in his chair during the whole process anxious to enter the fray and express his feelings. Whenever staff has scored verbally he has nodded his head in agreement. Several times he has been cautioned from participating directly as have the other members of the audience: Jerry, a black; Steve, a caucasian; Mike, a caucasian; and Carlos, Leon's homeboy and partner.

It was at this point that comments on what was occurring were invited from the group. Everyone wanted to speak at once. Steve, who had been the most reserved member of the group, stated that David seemed to have a need to shoot off his mouth and push people around to prove how tough

he was. With some insight he suggested that if David really was that "bad" he wouldn't find it necessary to tell everybody about it. Carlos made it quite clear that David was totally out of line as a newcomer trying to challenge the authority of Leon who was the acknowledged "Pres" of the Chicanos in 'A' dormitory, especially since he felt that the Mexican-Americans should stick together while in camp regardless of gang affiliation. Jerry immediately took James' position that a hierarchy of leadership and racial identification had no place in the group living situation and that such divisions only led to problems. He identified with David in that he felt Leon was displaying autocratic behavior.

David now found himself in the distinctly peculiar situation of having two black wards identifying with him and giving him support. He accepted this support reluctantly, seeming to recognize that it was a fleeting thing at best, stemming from the basic hostility that Jerry and James felt towards Leon.

While this situation produced some discomfort David was sufficiently motivated to utilize the support to continue expressing his feelings. His verbalizations became less invective in nature and the anger and emotional outbursts began to subside. Staff now assumed the *role of director* and Leon portrayed himself. Nonchalantly Leon seated himself and immediately directed a tirade at David. This monologue was interrupted by staff before David, who had risen from his chair with fists clenched, could respond. The group was asked what they felt was happening at this particular moment.

Carlos stated that Leon was letting David know where it was at, and that he should listen because it reflected the views of all the Chicanos. Mike disagreed. He felt that Leon's statements were made as a retaliation toward David on a personal level and that Leon's constant use of the word "we" was a cop out, a defense to indicate that David stood alone and that Leon had the backing of numbers. Mike felt that Leon's trip was basically intimidating and as such was on a par with David's behavior. David, sensing support from a different quarter, accused Leon of making value judgments before getting facts and of jumping on him because he was a member of a rival gang. He accused Carlos of hypocrisy because he had mentioned Chicano solidarity at the same time he was putting David down in front of blacks and caucasians.

DAVID: You punks think you are big vergas because you come from Flores, and you pull this Chicano power crap just because you want to be top vatos. Well you can take it and shove it!

Leon responded by saying he was going to put David on the "leva" until he straightened out. In essence this would amount to virtual ostracism of David by other Mexican-Americans in camp.

David replied by saying that he didn't much care about a Flores "leva," and as it didn't look like he would be allowed to remain in camp it was immaterial to him.

The interchange between the two boys was now taking place in fairly normal tones. Leon began dealing with David on the level of a person of authority trying to reason with a recalcitrant underling. David was resisting this process by pointedly ignoring Leon's arguments and discussing his own feelings about his sense of right and justice. While he played the *role* of wronged party with obvious relish, it was apparent that he had little insight at this point into the cause of the precipitating problem and his part in its formation.

Staff suggested that the wards physically exchange places and Leon play the *role* of David while David assume the part of Leon. Both boys initially balked at the idea of role reversal but at the urging of others in the group reluctantly exchanged seats. Leon was first to begin the dialogue. He assumed an exaggerated stance of braggadocio, fists clenched and lips drawn back. He stared defiantly at David.

LEON: (*As David*) You puto! You ain't gonna tell me what to do!

David was struggling at this point, not sure of how he should react. Then, apparently remembering Leon's tirade against him, launched into a vituperative monologue which continued for some minutes despite Leon's attempts to interrupt. The other members of the group seemed to be enjoying the performance immensely. When David finally ran out of words staff asked him what he was feeling at that moment.

DAVID: I don't know man, but I really got pissed off when he called me a puto and started staring at me like that. It made me feel like kicking him and going off on him.

STAFF: Do you want to go off on him now?

DAVID: Yeah, Yeah I do!

STAFF: (*Handing David a towel*) Okay, hit the desk with this. You can hit the desk like it was Leon.

David takes the towel and tentatively hits the desk. Once, twice, three times. Then he knots the end and brings it crashing down a half dozen times.

STAFF: Who are you hitting, David?

DAVID: Him, Leon, the Flores.

STAFF: (*Turning to the other members of the group*) What's happening here?

JERRY: It seem to me that he's getting pissed off at Leon for doing the same thing to him that he did to Leon.

MIKE: I think he's pissed off at himself.

STAFF: (*To David*) What do you think about that?

DAVID: I don't know what you're talking about.

LEON: Look man, I was doing the same thing you were doing from the first minute you walked in here. So maybe you can see how you was coming off.

David struggles with this concept for a moment then crashes the towel violently against the desk.

DAVID: You guys don't know crap!

David does not say this too convincingly, however. The rest of the group has had a glimpse of the truth and immediately begin to belabor the point.

STEVE: Hey man, maybe you got angry because you know the way it really is. Maybe you better face it instead of copping out.

JERRY: (*Changing allegiance*) Yeah, don't seem like you can take what you was giving out.

CARLOS: That's the trouble with you man, you don't know what's coming down even when everyone else can see it!

David now finds himself alone once again with the group allied against him. Yet, it is different this time as all the members seem to be aware of a game he is playing which he is not fully aware of himself. The other wards are making judgments based on their observations of his actions and it is obvious that their remarks are beginning to have some effect. David cannot disregard the fact that Leon acting as David produced strong antagonistic feelings within himself, yet he finds it difficult to admit that his actions could produce these same feelings in others. This would place him in the position of having to assume the responsibility for the problem and would destroy his major defense. Suddenly he lashes out with the towel striking Leon across the face, then screams at the group.

DAVID: Damn it! Why don't you putos get off my back?

Leon has reacted by pulling the towel out of David's hands and is about to hit him with the knotted end when staff intervenes and pushes both boys back into their chairs. The other boys have leaped up anticipating a fight.

STAFF: Okay, okay, now just sit down and calm down!

Leon is rubbing his face, looking daggers at David who is slumped in his

chair breathing heavily. The other members of the group settle back as staff asks them to explain what has just happened.

JAMES: I think David knows what's happening and is afraid to admit it. He can't face that he's wrong so he has to take it out on somebody.

MIKE: Yeah, he acts just like my little brother when he doesn't get his way or what he wants. He has a tantrum!

JERRY: Yeah, he acting like a kid.

The others all echo Jerry's sentiments as David sits in his chair fighting back tears. Leon, sensing that David has just passed through an emotional crisis, relaxes and begins to talk. He becomes quite reflective.

LEON: I don't know, sometimes it's hard to be real. I mean to really see yourself. When I was on the outs . . . when I was a kid, I got into fights all the time. I guess I was a real vato loco. Everybody thought I was crazy, even my parents. I was in the hospital maybe five or six times. When I was fifteen I got shot and everybody thought I was going to die. When I got back on the street I was a big man. I was tough. Then I started thinking how weird it was that it took almost getting killed and having a hole in my side to make me a person of respect. Anyway, now I had my rep and didn't have to go around personally going off on people. Sure, I done some gang banging but most of the time since then I kept laid back and out of sight. I got things I want to do. I got a vieja and a kid. I guess I know what David feels like. I guess he still got to make his rep. He's just not going about it the right way. Going off on vatos in camp ain't gonna make it. That way somebody going to do him when he gets back on the street. We all got to get along here and do our time the best we can. We got to stick together. When I was sitting here doing his trip I was getting next to how he was feeling. I guess because I been there myself.

Leon appears to have lost all his animosity, and during the course of his *soliloquy* David listened intently. David seemed surprised that Leon expressed empathy with his feelings, especially in view of the towel incident. He was still having difficulty in controlling his tears.

STAFF: (*To David*) Okay, how are you feeling now?

DAVID: I don't know, man. I don't know how I'm feeling. I feel all washed out. I feel like I don't give a damn about anything. I'm tired.

LEON: You got to get with it. You were talking that everyone was down on you without giving you a chance. Well it seems to me that you were down on everybody without giving us a chance.

DAVID: I don't know. With the putos on the street you got to get them

before they get you, you know that, otherwise they walk all over you. I know you got homeboys here but no one is going to walk over me.

LEON: Okay, no one is going to walk over you here as long as you take care of business. There's too many dudes out there that want to see us firing on each other. You're just going to make it harder on yourself and the rest of us unless you're cool.

DAVID: (*Shaking his head to indicate doubt, reflects for a moment, then tentatively holds out his hand. He finds it had to meet Leon's eyes.*) Okay, okay. I'm sorry about the towel. I guess I was pretty pissed off.

Leon takes David's hand and shakes it, formally making the comment that he can clearly see why they call him Mad Dog. At this point with David's semi-recognition of responsibility the group session wound down to an uneventful close.

For David the psychodrama was both a catharsis and an initiation into the group living setting of 'A' dormitory. While the session could not be considered a panacea for David's problems, it did provide the initial step which allowed him to remain in the program. Perhaps most important is the fact that for the first time it allowed him to see himself as others saw him—the beginning of insight.

David's difficulties were by no means over, however. His volatile reactions to stressful situations continued to present difficulties, but these episodes seemed to diminish as he became more comfortable with the group living routine. He was the subject of one more psychodramatic encounter some three weeks after his initial experience. This incident involved verbal aggression against a black ward. By this time he was well integrated into the Chicano culture of 'A' dormitory and had assumed the leadership position upon the departure of Leon. The second session found him less defensive, primarily it would seem because of his new status. He was able to conceptualize and resolve the problem with no great difficulty. While this second session was smooth it lacked the emotional content of the first session and was quite superficial. David entered into the *play* condescendingly and while cooperative made it quite clear that his participation was a magnanimous gesture. Nevertheless, the psychodrama did achieve the desired result of alleviating the immediate problem. In retrospect both sessions were inherently valuable in reducing tensions in the dormitory and providing a means of establishing communication between individuals where no communication existed before. It would seem also that the psychodrama opened channels of awareness to all the participants and in David's case a recognition of alternative points of view.

David M.'s case was by no means unique. It exemplifies, however, the use of psychodramatic techniques in the alleviation of immediate serious problems involving aggressive wards in the institutional setting. Obviously such an approach is not suited to all individuals. Prerequisite is at least a willingness on the part of the subject to cooperate and to participate. At times such cooperation is withheld or given so grudgingly that the attempt is useless. As the sessions are unscheduled, drawing various participants from the stress situation at the time of occurrence, the success or failure of the procedure lies to a great extent on the skill of the director, his ability to capture and create interest in the technique, his control of the group, and the smoothness of his transition from the encounter, or confrontation, to the psychodrama. Many times this is a difficult task at best. Almost, it seems, he must catch the subjects unaware and slide them into the psychodrama, presenting a *fait accompli* in which the subjects become involved before they are aware they are involved.

In keeping with the idea of a smooth transition a session is not normally designated with any type of appellation though the psychodramatic segment may be referred to as "the play," or "the game," if a participant raises the question. Both nomenclatures are calculated to denote an enjoyable experience rather than an unpleasant one.

Psychodrama as practiced in 'A' dormitory has, without a doubt, had a salutary effect on both the individual participants and the group as a whole. In those cases where time and circumstances have been favorable it has achieved the stated goal of reducing tension by alleviating the pressures generated by the aggressive ward. It has helped wards achieve insight into their problems by allowing them to view themselves as others view them and has proved to be a powerful tool of catharsis. In terms of control the benefits are obvious. A tranquil living group produces fewer problems.

It remains to be seen how psychodrama will fare as it becomes a part of the institutional process. From all indications, however, it promises to be an exceptionally valuable treatment tool.

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