

# HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT VERY EASY TO CHANGE AFTER ALL

An unjoyful message and its implications for social programs

A while back there was a severe shortage of electricity in New York City, and Columbia University tried to help out in two ways: A card reading "Save a watt" was placed on everyone's desk, and janitors removed some light bulbs from university corridors. The ways in which this shortage was made up for illustrate two major approaches to social problem solving. One approach is based on the assumption that people can be taught to change their habits, that they can learn to remember to switch off unused lights. The second approach assumes that people need not, or will not, change and instead alter their environment so that, even if they leave light switches on, watts are saved.

The prevalent approach in the treatment of our numerous and still-multiplying social problems is the first. Imbedded in the programs of the federal, state, and city governments and embraced almost instinctively by many citizens, especially liberal ones, is the assumption that, if you go out there and get the message across—persuade, propagandize, explain, campaign—people will change, that human beings are, ultimately, quite pliable. Both political leaders and the general public believe that advertising is powerful, that information campaigns work, and that an army of educators, counselors, or rehabilitation workers can achieve almost everything if they are sufficiently numerous, well trained, and richly endowed.

But can they? We have come of late to the realization that the pace of achievement in domestic programs ranges chiefly from the slow to the crablike—two steps backward for every one forward—and the suspicion is growing that there is something basically wrong with most of these programs. A nagging feeling persists that maybe something even more basic than the lack of funds or will is at stake. Consequently, social scientists like my-

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self have begun to re-examine our core assumption that man can be taught almost anything and quite readily. We are now confronting the uncomfortable possibility that human beings are not very easily changed after all.

Take smoking, for instance. Since 1964, when the surgeon general began calling attention to the dangers of cigarettes, a vast and expensive campaign has been waged, involving press releases, lectures, television advertisements, pamphlets, and notations on the cigarette package. The positive result of all this activity, however, has been slight. At first there was no effect at all; actual cigarette smoking continued to rise until 1967. Then it dropped from 11.73 cigarettes per day per person aged eighteen years and over to 10.94 in 1969. More recently the level has risen again.

The moral? If you spend \$27 million, you may get enough people to switch from Camels to Kools to make the investment worthwhile for the Kool manufacturers. However, if the same

\$27 million is used to make nonsmokers out of smokers—that is, to try to change a basic habit—no significant effect is to be expected. Advertising molds or teases our appetites, but it doesn't change basic tastes, values, or preferences. Try to advertise desegregation to racists, world government to chauvinists, temperance to alcoholics, or—as we still do at the cost of \$16 million a year—drug abstinence to addicts, and see how far you get.

In fact, the mass media in general have proved to be ineffectual as tools for profoundly converting people. Studies have shown that persons are more likely to heed spouses, relatives, friends, and "opinion leaders" than broadcasted or printed words when it comes to deep concerns.

Another area in which efforts to remake people have proved glaringly inefficient is that of the rehabilitation of criminals. We rely heavily on re-educational programs for prisoners. But it is a matter of record that out of every two inmates released, one will be rearrested and returned to prison in short order. Of the 151,355 inmates in state prisons on December 31, 1960, there were 74,138, or 49 per cent, who had been committed at least once to adult penal institutions. Reformatories come off no better. A study of 694 offenders released by one well-known institution reports 58.4 per cent returned within five years. The study concludes self-assuringly: "But this is no worse than the national average."

What about longer, more sustained educational efforts? Mature people can be taught many things—speed reading, belly dancing, Serbo-Croatian—usually with much more pain, sweat, cost, time, and energy than most beginning pupils suspect. When we turn, though, to the modification of ingrown habits, of basic values, of personality traits, or of other deep-seated matters, the impact is usually much less noticeable.

What is becoming increasingly apparent is that to solve social problems by changing people is more expensive and usually less productive than approaches that accept people as they are

and seek to mend not them but the circumstances around them. Just such a conclusion was implicit, for instance, in an important but widely ignored study of automobile safety done by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Applying cost-effectiveness measurements to efforts to cut down the horrendous toll on American highways—59,220 Americans were killed in 1970—the HEW study noted that driver education saves lives at the cost of \$88,000 per life. New automobile accessories, as simple as seat belts, proved more than a thousand times as effective; saving a life this way, it was

high dosage was administered seem to have resulted in some fatalities. Now, though, smaller dosages are being given, and Antabuse is slowly regaining serious consideration.

The failure of educational and therapeutic approaches to help most heroin addicts has led, finally, to the wide use of a substitute, methadone, which is usually referred to as a blocking drug because it is said to curb the craving for heroin. Let's not ask here if methadone is the most suitable drug for the purpose, to what extent it is different from heroin, or even if it actually blocks out heroin. For our

searchers that serious weight problems seem to arise, *not* from faulty will power, character, or motivation—qualities subject to educability—but from different rates of metabolism and divergent nutritional pathways. These pathways are established early in childhood and may be either set for life or altered by medication, but exhortation or other educational efforts can alter them little.

Again medication has proved to be more promising than education in dealing with mental patients. After year upon year of increase, the number of patients in mental hospitals de-

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## Solving social problems by changing people is apparently less productive than accepting people as they are and changing their circumstances instead.

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computed, costs a mere \$87. Yet we continue to stress driver education as the chief preventive measure; the laws regarding the redesign of autos are moderate in their requirements and are poorly enforced. Similarly, we exhort people not to drive while under the influence of liquor, even not to drink in excess to begin with. But these are rather monumental, perhaps impossible, educational missions. However, a simple device that measures the level of intoxication by breath analysis and that is widely used by highway patrols in Great Britain has tended to scare drunken drivers off the roads in that country. It could be applied to a rapid reduction of traffic fatalities in this country. Educate drinkers later.

The problem of educating against drug addiction in general offers parallel lessons. Acting on the belief that personality predispositions yield fairly rapidly to such approaches, we have tried a variety of informational, persuasive, personal, and group-therapeutic techniques in the battle against addiction. However, these approaches have rehabilitated only a few addicts. Much more promising are counterdrugs. For example, Antabuse, which if taken makes a person feel quite uncomfortable when he drinks, is more effective than psychotherapy in dealing with alcoholics. It takes so much less effort to decide each day to take medication than to decide, all the time, to refrain from drinking. True, Antabuse so far is a little-known remedy, and many who do know of it are skeptical, because early experiments in which a

purpose, it is sufficient to say that, unlike the educational and therapeutic approaches to heroin addiction, methadone is effective. That is, people taking methadone work, study, are satisfied, function as human beings and citizens, and have a much lower criminality record. Thus, of a group of 990 men carefully examined, those employed or attending school rose from 27 per cent at admission to the methadone program to 65 per cent after one year on the program, to 77 per cent after two years, and to 92 per cent in the third year. A report by the director of the District of Columbia narcotics treatment division shows that as the number of addicts on methadone increased, the level of crimes that addicts tended to commit fell almost proportionally. Thus, with about 20 per cent of the addicts on such treatments, robberies in Washington, D.C., fell from 12,432 in 1969 to 11,222 in 1971. There is no evidence that any educational program has ever had such an effect.

Though there seem to be no similarly effective drugs to help food addicts (or persons afflicted with obesity), we have recently been informed by medical re-

clined sharply in 1956. This turning point came about, not because therapy was expanded or intensified or a new procedure found, but because tranquilizers were widely introduced. Most of those discharged now live on medications at home.

Technological devices and medication are not the sole approaches we may rely upon more heavily once we understand the limits of adult educability and allow ourselves to see the full extent and implications of these limits. Improved matching of persons and jobs may go a long way toward reducing the need for job training. Here the two alternative assumptions about the pliability and perfectibility of human nature come into sharp focus. Few educators are quite willing to assume, as it was once put rather extremely, that "given time and resources, we can make a piano player out of anybody." Yet whole job-training programs are still based on such an assumption. For instance, the scores of training programs for the unemployed or the to-be-employed that are run or supported by the Department of Labor assume that people can be

changed, and quite fundamentally.

The Department of Labor stresses, in its discussion of "social-psychological barriers" to employment, the need to modify "attitudes, aspirations, motivation (especially achievement motivation), ability or willingness to defer gratification, and self-image." And the 1968 Manpower Report suggests "the necessity of direct efforts to modify the attitudes of the disadvantaged before introducing them to job situations." One major training program aims at providing "needed communication skills, grooming and personal hygiene, the standards of behavior and

remade lies in a total and voluntary reconstruction of their social environment. Thus, when students withdraw from the campus into a rural commune, or Jews emigrate from the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe to found a new Israeli kibbutz, life can be deeply recast. The creation of a whole new environment for addicts—indeed, a new social community—on a voluntary basis, as achieved by Synanon, is highly effective, and Alcoholics Anonymous seems to provide a cure as effective as or better than Antabuse. Many alcoholics and mental patients who are integrated into therapeutic communities are reported to recover well.

This total-change approach is very appealing to a radical New Left perspective, which suggests that new persons cannot evolve except in a new society and that a new society will emerge only from the deep efforts of people in the crisis of reshaping their world. At the same time one must note that effective total-change groups work only for those who join voluntarily. Most addicts, mental patients, prison inmates, and others in need of change don't volunteer to join. Hence, the total-change approach is considerably less applicable to social problems than some would have it be.

Much of what I have said is primarily concerned with adult educability. It also holds true, albeit to a lesser degree, for children. While children, especially younger ones, are more educable than adults—who must often first be disabused of the education they have acquired as youngsters—most Americans, both the general public and the policy-makers, still enormously overestimate what the education of children can achieve.

The schools, which are still the main institutions of education for children aged six through eighteen, cannot carry out many of the missions assigned to them. Most schools do not build character, open the mind, implant an appreciation of beauty, or otherwise serve as the greater humanizer or the social equalizer as educators would wish them to do. In desperation it is suggested now that the schools concentrate on teaching the three Rs, and it is common knowledge that they have a hard time doing even that.

Probably the greatest disappointment educators have encountered in recent years, and have not quite come to terms with, is the failure of intensive educational campaigns to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up with their more advantaged peers. As has already been widely reported, virtually all of the 150-odd compensatory education schemes that have been tried either have not worked at all or have worked only marginally or only for a small proportion of the

student population. The Coleman Report makes this point, and the same conclusion comes from another source. Professor Jesse Burkhead of Syracuse University found that differences in the achievements of high school students in large-city schools are almost completely conditioned by the students' social backgrounds and environments, including the incomes and occupations of the parents (class), housing conditions, and ethnicity.

The reasons for this inability to bridge the distance between the educational achievements of disadvantaged and better off children are hotly

performance generally expected by employers."

In a study I conducted with three of my colleagues for the Center for Policy Research, we found that persons have deep-seated preferences in their work behavior that are very difficult to change, and we concluded that it may be unethical to try to change them. Thus, if a person prefers to engage in nonroutine work of the more creative type, at an irregular pace, training him or her to be a "good" assembly-line worker—which entails teaching not only how to turn bolts but also how to be a more "uptight" person—may be both ineffective and morally dubious, especially if we are correct in suggesting that people's existing preferences can be readily analyzed so that they can be helped to choose jobs compatible with their personalities. It is also much less costly to test and assist people than it is to train and mold them. If we run out of compatible jobs, jobs may be changed to suit people rather than people to suit jobs.

One of the few effective and efficient ways in which people can be basically

debated. It seems to me that the key reason for the failure of compensatory education lies in the fact that the disadvantaged children are locked into total environments, which include home, neighborhood, parental poverty, discrimination, and inhibiting models of behavior. We cannot hope to change one without changing the others. Education will become more effective when it works together with other societal changes—which, of course, means that, by itself, it is not half so powerful as we often assume.

The contention that personal growth and societal changes are much harder to come by than we had assumed, especially via one version or another of the educationalist-enlightenment approach, is not a joyful message, but one whose full implications we must learn to accept before we can devise more effective social programs. Once we cease turning to ads, leaflets, counselors, or teachers for salvation, we may realize that more can be achieved by engineers, doctors, social movements, and public-interest groups; and the educators will find new and much-needed allies. □