The Relation of Social and Economic Factors to Mental Hygiene

BY
C. MACFIE CAMPBELL, M. D.
BALTIMORE
Psychopathic Institute, Johns Hopkins University

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C. MACFIE CAMPBELL, M.D.

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C. Macfie Campbell, M. D.,
Johns Hopkins Hospital.

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The causal factors of mental disorder or maladjustment are either in the individual himself, or environmental. It is with this latter case that the author chiefly deals, and calls to our attention some of the factors in our social organization which touch upon the problem of the formation of habits of adjustment, and which determine the nature of the environment to which the individual must adjust himself.

MODERN medicine is largely preventive in its ideals, and the student in his researches must be ready to go beyond the individual to the study of the complex environmental factors, which play such an important rôle in the occurrence of disease. In no department of medicine is the preventive aspect more important than in psychiatry, that branch of medicine which deals with mental disorders. Psychiatry does not merely include the study of the nervous system; on the other hand, the pathological nature of some of which is frequently ignored, while others are not honestly called mental disorders by the physician in view of social prejudice. Thus neurasthenia is a mental disorder, whether the relatives like the fact or not; so is hysteria; as examples of mental disorders not recognized as such may be cited many cases of ill-balanced enthusiasms and fads, of marital incompatibility and family estrangement, of prejudices and infatuations, of revolt and intolerance, of day-dreaming and unproductive endeavor.

The causal factors of both the mild and grave forms of mental disorder or maladjustment may be chiefly in the individual, or may be largely environmental; where the cause lies more especially with the individual there may be at least two very different sources of the disorder. The disorder may arise on the basis of some structural or nutritional damage to the central nervous system; on the other hand, the disorder may be the culmination of very faulty habits of adjustment, the onset being precipitated by some definite situation.

To outline the most favorable environmental conditions, and to formulate the rules of hygienic conduct, would mean to sketch a new utopia and to give a counsel of perfection.

Our present task is more modest; it consists in calling attention to some factors in our social organization, which touch the problem of the formation of habits of adjustment, and which determine the nature of the
life the emancipation of the family may leave the parent stranded without individual resources of interest and occupation. The problems of mental hygiene, illustrated by the above remarks, take one into a complicated social and economic field, and each one furnishes occasion for much patient research.

The factors which influence the formation of habits in youth, and thus help to determine the later ability to meet the various tests of adult life in a healthy manner, are chiefly the atmosphere of the home and of the school.

At present the home and the school are unhappily divorced; their closer union is much to be recommended, for in the school organization the community has the necessary apparatus for making the parents somewhat familiar with the best methods and the issues involved. In order that the desirable continuity between the home life and the school life may be established, parents and teachers should meet from time to time. For the teachers to be of use in such relations, with poor habits of thought, with the tendency to replace thoughts with words and to accept with little criticism the dicta of authority, with little training of character and of personal judgment, and without having found himself in the sense of realizing his special aptitudes and thus getting some direction for his adult occupation. To enter haphazard into the first occupation at hand is risky for the individual and uneconomical for the community. The individual risk is increased when the adolescent passes from the school into the rôle of wage-earner with no training for social adaptation, with narrow interests, with valuable aspects of his nature neglected.

The modern highly specialized division of labor means that many workers have tasks of the most mechanical and monotonous nature; industrial hygiene is much concerned about the lungs, the blood and other organs of the workers, but that the task is soul-deadening appears to be of little interest. Mental hygiene cannot ignore that fact; for it aims to develop those qualities which give to human life its value and without which the preservation of the most superb physique loses all its meaning. Mental hygiene aims to supplement and thus to justify physical hygiene.

Employers of labor might well be encouraged to take an interest not only in the ventilation of their factories, but also in the moral atmosphere which is so important for their employees; psychologists may come to be employed not only in the interests of the employer to increase the workers' industrial value, but in the interests of the workers to increase their value as individuals.

Mental disorders tend to thrive on the soil of faulty habits and unsatisfactory environment; with unco-operative occupation, with sources of recreation limited through lack of training in appreciating the harmonies of life, with sense of personal and civic responsibility uncultivated, with no clear realization of the sound basis of good sexual standards, the continuation of healthy adjustment depends altogether on original constitution and luck. To them the individual will owe his preservation from sexual indiscretions, from injudicious mating, from drifting into aberrant methods of satisfaction such as chronic alcoholism. In the face of any special stress or strain due to the vicissitudes of life, his training has done little to safeguard him by developing those balancing factors which are so important, the feeling of social solidarity, outlets for healthy intellectual and aesthetic interests, and a religion which may or may not conform to that of any denomination, but which brings him into some fellowship, inspired by ideals of service.

In trying to find the best means to aid his patient in regaining mental health or avoiding a breakdown, the physician is disheartened by the lack of available social organization. It is easy to give the patient general directions, to talk of recreation, of increasing his social affiliations, of taking some part in altruistic work. Where the individual is closely attached to a religious body, he may find in its various activities a congenial opportunity for the cultivation of many interests and from his religious director derive support and stimulus. But with many patients religious affiliations have very formal value, and modern society has not replaced the support and comfort of the religious organization by adequate substitutes. For the better educated and privileged classes opportunities for healthful recreation, social intercourse and stimulating intellectual activities may be satisfactory. For the poor the situation is different; the various possibilities of satisfaction for the many-sided demands of our nature, which are available for the privileged, are here reduced to the saloon and the moving picture theatre; with many no training has enabled them to make use of the art treasures, the musical performances or other recreational possibilities of their environment. When we look for an opportunity of useful social affiliation, frequently no neighborhood organization exists, and no suitable member of the community is available to act as spiritual director. This lack of social organization makes it difficult for the patient, who has recovered from a mental disorder, to get that satisfaction from varied and healthy activity.
in contact with his fellows, which is the best guarantee against the return of morbid moods and individual fancies.

While many women have the same industrial life as men, the large majority find their sphere of activity in the home. The care of children forms a large part of their work, and is of vital importance to the community; yet here, too, as in the case of education in general, the individual receives little training for the adult task. A task which is of supreme importance for the community is left altogether to the instincts and the casual information of the individual. To the intelligent woman few subjects could more readily be made to combine deep scientific interest with great practical importance than the study of the development and training of the child, a field which at the present moment urgently demands wide and intensive research. But in women's colleges there is as a rule no place in the curriculum for this subject. The time may come, however, when the intellectual woman will not feel that the nursery is an unwelcome drag on her higher aspirations, but will see in it a great opportunity for the congenial employment of her intellect. Few fields of scientific research offer more tempting problems at present than the nursery.

The same principles which have been discussed in relation to the productive period, find further illustration in the declining years of life. Then, as earlier, the individual craves satisfaction for his human needs, but the objective sources of satisfaction are becoming limited, the outlook is more restricted, hope no longer is an anodyne for the pain of unsatisfied longings. Even in the absence of any wasting of the brain tissue, adjustment tends to become more difficult, and there may develop querulous discontent, unjustified suspicions, despair as to the future, subjective creations in the place of objective grasp. In many cases the disorder depends on the limited resources of the individual, which have been developed by no social training, and have not been stimulated by the existence in the community of suitable social centers. Such mental disorders are not limited to any community, but affect the farmer and his wife on the lonely farm, the housewife and the worn-out industrial unit in the crowded city.

Each community has its own needs and its own opportunities, and in working out its problems will do well to utilize those agencies which already do such good work on an individual basis.

The optimist looks forward confidently to the time when each community will take its mental hygiene as seriously as its physical and industrial hygiene, and when it will point with no more pride to the cheapness and excellence of its industrial products than to the mental health and happiness of the men and women who make these products.
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