

SKID ROW POPULATION MAINTENANCE: SOCIAL SYSTEM EQUILIBRIUM

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INTRODUCTION

The equilibrium assumption for social systems is perhaps the most maligned aspect of functional analysis. Part of the criticism is directed at the teleological use of the concept (Turner 1975). But equilibrium simply means a relatively stable set of relations among the elements of an identifiable social organization (Larson 1973 140). The fact that a social system is surviving and retains its identity is evidence of its equilibrium.

But balance among the elements and vis-à-vis the environment is problematic rather than automatic. Merton (1957 25) properly rejects the idea that every activity contributes to the stability of relations, and that any structure must necessarily be retained to fulfill a required function. If the balance of relations among elements of a social system is taken as problematic, the equilibrium assumption becomes a starting point for research, rather than the end of theory. Our question is: *How* is the organization able to maintain itself?

Population maintenance is the first requisite for survival of social organizations. Where population is not assured through reproduction, a means of recruitment must be instituted. Beyond recruitment, a stable set of relations among the elements of the organization requires socialization and retention of population. Maintenance of population, including both socialization and retention is an aspect of equilibrium in social systems.

METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

These data were collected during field work in Fort Worth, Texas from January through June 1966. Information in the social characteristics of 225 skid row men was obtained, of which about one fifth were informally interviewed, some in rescue mission settings or at the rehabilitation farm. Interviews were also conducted with the chief of police, two police officers, three rescue mission workers, the director, and two assistant managers of the rehabilitation farm. Historical data were provided from newspaper accounts and documents filed at the rehabilitation farm.

The information is of a descriptive, intuitive nature, less than real participant observation

and more than simple observation. Participation in some activities, such as meals and religious services, was invited and accepted, but at no time did the researcher conceal his identity or the general purpose of research.

Two sources of bias arise in this method of data collection. 1) There is bias in the observer's perception of the action (Riley 1963 71). It is limited to a small part of the total situation, and prior experience causes selectivity and interpretation of events. Disclosure of the researcher's identity has the advantage of legitimizing questions about the meaning of events to others where they might otherwise not be appropriate. 2) A related source of bias is *control effect*. The presence of the researcher affects the normal interaction patterns of participants. Since skid row men are highly suspicious of outsiders, some control effect did occur in this study. For example, several potential informants refused to talk with the researcher when they understood his mission. At the same time, many other participants volunteered information (Whyte 1955 298; Denzin 1970; Hynson 1975; Festinger 1964).

The strategy for this research was: first, research, then theory. This is important because it acts as a safeguard against selective perception where observations are limited by a predetermined conceptual framework (Reynolds 1971 139).

SKID ROW AND ITS MEN

Almost all large cities in the United States have an identifiable skid row area (Bogue 1963 8). The scene as revealed in Fort Worth, Texas is typical of many other similar cities. The physical features of the area include run-down vacant buildings, streets littered with trash, bars and taverns, pawn shops, liquor stores, and walk-up hotels with cubicle rooms. The overriding impression was one of age and decay. The Fort Worth skid row area is adjacent to the downtown shopping district, which is a convenience for homeless men to beg for money or shoplift. It is an irritant for businessmen who receive complaints from shoppers and for police who receive complaints from businessmen. The area is generally unpopular and it has a high rate

of police activity.

Skid row inhabitants are predominantly male, though a few women live in or near the district. Physically, the men are unkempt, older than the general population, and often in poor health. Though some are technically married, they function as single men, lacking both the physical and emotional support of a family. It is accurate to call them "homeless" although many live more or less permanently at the same address because the population contains a large transient element. Work records of the men are uneven, but typically reveal much unemployment and some occupational skidding. This factor contributed to a nearly universal feature of skid row — poverty. Finally, outsiders view the inhabitants in pejorative terms, stereotyped, as *winos*, *perverts*, *prostitutes*, *bums*, and *psychotics*. Such terms are partially merited, but are oversimplified.

In Fort Worth there are three agencies designed to take skid row men off the streets: the rescue missions, the jail, and the rehabilitation farm. They play an important role in maintaining a well-socialized population on skid row, and thus contribute to a relatively stable set of relations among its elements and to its identity as a social organization.

THE RESCUE MISSION

Religious conversion is one way out of skid row. There were two rescue missions similar in function and method. The central conscious motive for such a mission is to rescue men from degenerate lives. Informed by a fundamentalist theology, the mission seeks to provide a way out for homeless men through personal religious conversion. This means a strong-willed repudiation of drinking behavior, and acceptance of religious doctrine to establish supernatural aid. Partly as a humanitarian act, but also as an inducement to attend religious services, the mission offers food and shelter to the men. It is widely recognized that the men come more for the shelter and food than for moralist motives, and mission personnel are self-conscious about those priorities.

The purpose of the mission is to disseminate its message widely, and to see that its facilities are not monopolized by a small segment of the population. The clientele must be made to recognize that the main purpose is

evangelism and not social welfare. Thus the aid to any individual is limited to five days in any one month, and called the "five day rule." The latent effect of such a rule is to return the men to skid row, nourished and rested after the time limit, but to sustain the skid row population. This contributes to training in economically marginal living.

Conversion in the sense of a change of lifestyle is actually a rare occurrence. Any religious profession by one of the men is most likely a repeat performance, testifying as much to the emotional instability of the man as to the power of the mission message. Repetitive conversion of the same individual testifies that this way out of skid row is quite difficult.

When a man indicates a desire to leave skid row and stop drinking, the five-day rule is suspended and the man becomes a semi-permanent resident of the mission, doing odd jobs such as janitorial and security service. He becomes an apprentice mission-keeper, but is closely watched. He receives only partial acceptance from the mission staff. He receives little counseling at least initially, and no attempt is made to help him leave the area. That leaves the convert in and among his former friends and drinking partners, though he is expected to avoid relating to them. Still, his new associates offer only limited acceptance and thus place the new convert in a socially marginal position. Most converts return to skid row shortly. Two informal norms of skid row contribute to a painless reentry. For the drinker, the price of return to a drinking group is a contribution to the purchase of a bottle. Second, it is taboo to ask where he has been or what he has been doing (Jackson, Connor 1953). Thus, the mission normally returns even the convert to skid row.

JAIL AS PROTECTION

Because of the antipathy of the community, skid row men are frequently arrested. According to the police chief, the arrests have a dual purpose: 1) to protect society by preventing accosting on the street and theft; 2) to protect the man himself from others. Arrest means jail. For some it is a place to spend the night. For others it may mean several days in jail, but none may be kept more than 15 days because of a ruling by the city health inspector regarding sanitation. The police, like the mission,

remove the skid row man from the streets briefly, rest and nourish him, and return him to the skid row community to renew his earlier pattern.

THE REHABILITATION FARM

The founder of the Fort Worth Rehabilitation Farm was Reverend Henry Cooper, a former proprietor of the New Liberty Mission in downtown skid row. He had earlier accepted the conversion approach, but came to believe that the convert must leave the area to have any chance at rehabilitation. The police were well aware of their sustaining function for the skid row community, and strongly supported Cooper's attempts to get financial aid for a farm. Eventually, most of the backing came from City Hall — the police and park departments. The police saw an opportunity to extend the skid row man's retention, and the park officers recognized a cheap supply of labor.

At first the farm was conceived as a semi-permanent residence for carefully screened volunteers from the city jail. Later, the farm was divided into a security unit, where all males arrested for drunkenness were sent, and an honors unit, where a man may sign up for an indefinite period, and not less than 30 days as a farm worker. The intent was to introduce them to the prospects of a life without alcohol and to extend their detention. Usually the fine was administered so that the sentence amounted to 30 days. It was hoped that after serving time in the security unit, the man would transfer to the volunteer side, and take himself off skid row permanently. In time, the man would be rehabilitated through removal from the skid row environment, acceptance on the basis of need, and a self-respect generated by performing useful work.

Such is the public philosophy of the rehabilitation farm, and there are some practical inducements given to the men to remain there. Food, clothing, medical and dental care, haircuts and tobacco, plus a small weekly "gratuity fee" are provided. Television and recreational equipment are available. Even burial is provided at county expense.

Nevertheless, the farm has not been effective in recruiting or retaining a permanent population. Most of the men in the security unit leave the farm as soon as they have served

their sentence. They return to skid row, where they will probably be arrested again. Those on the honors side are either sent to town or leave voluntarily from time to time. So the Fort Worth Rehabilitation Farm also contributes to the maintenance of skid row population with relief, renewal, and return of the men.

Values which allow skid row to be maintained become apparent when one examines the reasons why men leave the farm.

1) The fact that few of the men transfer from the security unit to the honors side of the farm is attributable in part to the rule which requires all persons on the honors side to perform some job. Many prefer, on serving their time, to go into town and risk re-arrest rather than working. No one under sentence is forced to work, and few privileges are extended to volunteers which are not also available to inmates. Thus, the return to skid row constitutes a rejection of the work ethic.

2) Some men sign up for the honors program with some specific need in mind, such as dental care, or clothing, and on meeting that need, return promptly to skid row. Some come in on Friday afternoon, spend a leisurely weekend, and then simply walk away from the work crew on Monday morning. Both of these factors involve rejection of the rehabilitation idea to the extent that it requires personal effort. Skid row is their way of life, and rehabilitation means nothing more than temporary recuperation.

3) Intermittently, men are banished from the farm for fighting, for refusal to work, and for drinking on the premises. Any of these offences is cause for a 30-day expulsion. It also means a drinking spree for most, since a man on the honors side usually saves part of the gratuity fee for just such an emergency. Banishment has two functions: To maintain order, and to protect the farm from criticism. Men are carried to town with instructions to "get it out of their system, then call the farm to be picked up."

4) No one of the men interviewed at the farm believed he could go indefinitely without drinking. Hence, each expects to make a trip to town periodically. Fighting or refusal to work is an excuse to leave the farm for a drinking spree. Once a man leaves the farm without authorization, the 30-day expulsion is mandatory. After that, he may he may return without further questions.

The meaning of rehabilitation for these men is a longer period between drinking bouts. Cooper, the Farm's director, accepts this meaning. His initial conversation with a man included the frank expectation that the man will need to go into town and get rid of it, then call the farm to come and get him. Cooper recognized that this probably makes it easier for the man to decide to go to town, but he says that it also makes it easier to return. "We help these people whom no one cares about!" Thus for the farm, a realistic meaning for rehabilitation is to increase the length of time between benders and to accept the role of population maintenance for skid row.

CONCLUSION

The agencies do provide a significant contribution to the health and longevity of skid row's population through patterns of short-term intermittent contact with the men. This intermittent pattern means that the skid row inhabitants by using the agencies, remain at a marginal level of living both economically and socially. In effect, these agencies aid in maintaining a well-socialized population on skid row by reinforcing transience, poverty, and isolation. They contribute to the stability and identity of skid row.

The reason cited for this unintended reinforcement is the inconsistency of values which underlie the programs and set limits on the acceptability of norms (Parsons 1951). Humanitarian concern, religious dogma, moralism, individual initiative, personal freedom, and self-protection are among the values which lead these agencies to perpetuate the conditions and the way of life on skid row.

The equilibrium concept was used as an organizing concept for this study. Population maintenance, including socialization and retention were delineated as components of equilibrium. Equilibrium is thus used as a heuristic device.

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