One

Young men in an industrial surburb

an enquiry into their position in society, with especial reference to their work and leisure

Summary

The social relations in which young men are involved and the activities in which they engage in everyday life are subject to changes throughout the entire course of social development. As small children, their horizon is almost entirely restricted to the home and the immediate neighbourhood, their families and other young children living nearby. Attendance at school broadens their horizons and modifies their existing social relations, but does not replace them. On leaving school to start work, their basic position in society is transformed from that of dependent consumers to that of wage-earning producers, though the latter position is not fully established until later.

Their activities outside work continue to be very largely controlled by and through friends of their own age and sex. Such friendships are more than simple links between individuals. From these associations there develop small informal groupings which are recognisable as distinct groups: characteristically, these groupings attach a high value to equality within the group, and, unlike the gang, lack personal leadership.

When the young men begin to develop stable relationships with girls, conflicts arise between the peer group and girls. Struggles take place for the loyalties of the young men and for control of their leisure time and spending power. The development of this new type of relationship, leading to engagement and marriage, entails a sharp break with the peer group. In taking the last major step towards social maturity and independence from the natal family – the establishment of families of their own – the young men are forced to rely upon the economic and social resources of their families to a greater extent than at any time since they started work. At the same time, the relationship between the young men and their parents approximate more closely to the peer group norm of sociability, of relationships between individuals regarded as social equals. Among families possessing little property

which might furnish means for regulating marriages, the peer group acts as a social control, discouraging marriage until the young men have established themselves as wage-earners. The natal family assists in establishing the new home, the peer group operates to postpone this step.

Social class exerts a most powerful influence at critical stages in the course of the young men's development. In a predominantly working class Borough, into which many families had moved during the past twenty five years, the most widespread differences were those that existed between various sections of the same broad class. In settled working class families, parents and children alike were involved in complex networks of social relations with relatives, friends and neighbours among whom they had grown up. By contrast, incoming families, whether of manual or white collar workers, were involved in simpler, discrete sets of social relations, and the friends and acquaintances of one member of the family were less likely to be known to other members. Children from these families were forced to rely far more upon formal associations for all kinds of friendships and social relations.

The young men from this 'lower-middle class' section of the working class were more likely to attend secondary schools and to enter white–collar jobs which required a longer period of training before they became established as wage earners. Their earnings were less, and their leisure activities different from those young men from working class families who left school at fourteen to enter manual jobs. They were more involved in formal associations and made less use of commercially provided entertainments.

Differences in the economic positions of the families in these two sections of the working class were initially small, but small differences at each stage of social development tended to reinforce one another, and their effects were generally cumulative. The different 'worlds' of the manual and white collar workers are not simply a function of differences in their work. They are the product of the whole course of social development.

Introduction

During this Century, young people in Western societies have increasingly become the object of speculative enquiry and of research. The period of adolescence and its associated problems have received attention from doctors, psychologists, sociologists, administrators, and

welfare workers. Sociologists have introduced the notions of 'youth culture' and the 'peer group' into the study of the activities and social groupings common to young people. They have thereby tended to stress the contrasts and possible conflicts between the 'youth culture' and the adult culture of the community. Parsons[1], for instance, states that 'negatively there is a strong tendency to repudiate interest in adult things and to feel at least a certain recalcitrance to the pressure of adult expectations and discipline'. The origins and social functions of the youth culture have been examined but the studies already undertaken have not for the most part treated the 'youth culture' as a phase through which cohorts pass in the course of their social development. The type of study which deals with the position of a single age set or cohort within a society can readily be extended to young adults to provide information about the changing pressures acting upon a cohort as it grows up. These pressures are part of the process of growing up in a particular society, and an examination of this process does in fact constitute a study of processes at work within the society itself. A study of young adults who, three or four years previously, were still in the midst of adolescence may then reveal some of the ways in which various elements of the social structure including peer groups and the youth culture have facilitated or impeded their development into mature adults.

In Britain, adulthood is ascribed to everyone on reaching their twenty-first birthday. They then emerge from 'infancy at law' to become autonomous 'persons' who may act independently of their parents and guardians, freely entering into contracts, and vested with certain rights and obligations. Under urban, industrial conditions, it is improbable that this legal coming of age will coincide with the attainment of economic and social independence. For the present purposes, economic independence is regarded as the stage when an individual earns sufficient to maintain himself without assistance from others, and has full control over his own expenditure. Social independence is reached when a person attains control of his social and domestic arrangements, submitting to the wishes of other adults from choice and not from compulsion. This degree of independence is often not achieved until the establishment of a separate household, usually upon marriage. Indeed, the degree of economic and social independence achieved by the age of twenty-one varies considerably with the social and economic status of the family from which an individual comes.

A builder's labourer who marries at eighteen and sets up his own home effectively reaches social and economic maturity before becoming an adult at law. A medical student may still be financially dependent upon his parents in his late twenties though he achieved legal maturity some years previously. So important and pervasive are the effects of those social and economic differences upon the factors concerned with social development that they repay the most extensive examination, even when the cohort studied is, by many criteria, socially quite homogeneous.

Studies of particular age sets thus require an attempt to specify at least some of the elements in society which promote on the one hand similarity and on the other diversity in social activities. In order to exclude other possible sources of variability, a restricted sampling frame is needed, and my own enquiry has been confined to young men who were just about twenty-one years of age, and who lived in a single industrial suburb of London. In addition to theoretical advantages, there were cogent practical reasons for this choice. The Social Medicine Research Unit which I was working for at the time of this enquiry possessed much detailed information about young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five in the suburb. A study of young men with duodenal ulcer and their families, together with a number of 'normal' controls, was being made. A study of mental and social health among boys of eighteen in the suburb had also just been completed. There was no comparable information concerning young women. Moreover, the inclusion of young women in the study would have introduced not only variations due to sex, but those due to marriage. Marriage changes the pattern of activities for both sexes, and while most of the young men are stillsingle at this age, a third or more of the young women were already married. The inclusion of young women in the enquiry would have necessitated a much larger sample, which was impracticable, since the time available for the research was limited.

The original sample comprised ninety-four young men, one half of all those whose names had appeared on the local Electoral Register for 1951 as 'young voters'. There was some 'wastage' from this sample. Several of the young men had moved out of the district by the time they were visited, a number were away on National Service, or otherwise not available, some were unable or unwilling to spare the time to help in the enquiry, and two turned out to be ten years older than the rest. Interviews with sixty-seven of the young men, and with the parents of

a further three who were away on National Service, provided the bulk of the material for this enquiry. It has been possible to check the validity of much of the information obtained in these interviews by consulting the two other studies of young men in the Borough already mentioned, and to test the generality of the findings by comparing them with other published material.

The activities of the young men; their social and psychological significance

The social activities of the young men may be regarded under two major aspects, the aspect of social organisation, and the aspect of personality. Examined under the aspect of social organisation, the connection between the various activities which the young men undertake at work and in leisure, and the major systems and institutions of the society constitutes the main source of their social significance. The study of these connections, that is the function which the activities have for their society and the values which that society attaches tothem, affords information about the processes at work within the society, and about its structure. However, a particular activity does not necessarily and invariably have a single, constant function and value. It is likely to possess somewhat different functions in respect of different sections of a community, thus affording clues to the sources of differentiation within the society.

Under the aspect of personality, the significance of social activities lies in their relations to the needs and interests of individuals. Activities, that is, are considered in respect of their meaning to the individual who undertakes or rejects them, and the value which he attaches to them. They thus provide suggestions for understanding the organisation of personality, and more especially its social characteristics. The meaning of a single activity may vary from individual to individual, and indeed from time to time for the same individual. Nevertheless, it is often possible to discern common trends and patterns of activity in groups of individuals from which similarities in the organisation of personality may be inferred (under most circumstances, such inferences will be limited to the 'superficial' levels of personality organisation. These superficial levels are not, of course, unimportant in the study of everyday behaviour).

The examination of particular activities and patterns of activity often requires reference to both personality and social organisation.

Social mobility, for instance, and its associated activities may in individual instances proceed from the inner needs and conflicts of individuals, but these could be distributed at random within large sections of the population. The existence of a high *rate* of mobility in a certain section of the population may be due to earlier social changes which affected the social structure and the position of that section of the population in relation to the rest of the community.

The ambiguity of social processes and institutions and its consequence

The same social processes and institutions may act both to preserve existing differences in status between various sections of the community, and at the same time to assist and direct mobility from one status level to another. This can best be taken into account by considering separately their relation to the social activities of the young men, first in so far as they tend to produce continuity and stability, and then in so far as they make for discontinuity and mobility. For instance, the educational system will be examined, first for the part it plays in directing young men into jobs at occupational levels similar to those of their parents; then for its part in directing young men from families at the lower status levels into jobs at occupational levels somewhat higher than those of their parents. Membership of youth clubs and participation in organised sports and commercial recreations will be similarly researched. In this way, it will be possible to assess the balance between social change and stability in the community and to identify the institutions and processes most directly concerned. This in turn leads to consideration of the actual processes of differentiation within the community, according to age, sex, and social class; and the ways in which these processes act in concert or in opposition to one another, facilitating and impeding fission within the social structure along a single line of differentiation, such as age or social class.