

# *Institutionalization: Trauma and Deliverance*

by CLEMENS BARTOLLAS

*The question of how one person can most effectively touch the life of another in a positive way is a significant one, especially for those whose mission is to increase the Kingdom of God. Drawing on extensive experience with juvenile delinquents and on his own scholarly research, Clemens Bartollas addresses himself to precisely this problem. In a sociological perspective, he raises a number of fascinating questions about interpersonal relations, and suggests a model for Christian action.*

## TRAUMA

Frightened and bewildered, Johnny sat handcuffed to another youth in the back seat of a state car as the officials of one state juvenile institution transported him to an end-of-the-line maximum security facility in a Midwestern state.<sup>1</sup> Sitting there, with great trepidation, he could not help reflecting on the various rumors he had heard about his upcoming placement. He had heard, for example, that this institution was underground, that staff beat boys with hoses, that black inmates were huge and victimized all whites, that a long stay would be forthcoming, and that it was nearly impossible to escape from this setting.<sup>2</sup> Johnny's time for reflection was short, for much more quickly than he expected, the state vehicle sped through the state hospital grounds and approached its destination. Supervised carefully and still handcuffed, the two youths were taken into the institution.

As soon as the official transfer process was completed, their orientation to this institution began. Johnny first met the intake cottage staff members and then, escorted by one of the staff members, he was taken around to meet the superintendent, the chaplain, the nurse and his social worker. Also, he received his room assignment, customary haircut, and clothes allotment. A good deal of that first day was spent in listening to various intake staff members explain cottage and institutional rules. Johnny, however, was so frightened that he merely went through the motions of listening to what was said.

Therefore, very much in a daze, this new youth attempts anxiously, almost desperately, to gain control over his new social world – seeking to discover how he can best cope with it. In general, Johnny, a composite case history, decides to stay by himself for the first few days, and unless he sees someone with whom he was close in another institution, he is suspicious of peers. He also keeps his distance from staff, primarily because staff members gave the bigger boys power over the smaller ones in the institution he just came from and he, like many of his peers, got pushed around as a result. If Johnny was sexually victimized in another facility, an additional problem arises because he knows that this must be concealed from fellow inmates at all costs; otherwise, relentless pressure to engage in sex play will be received from fellow inmates.

In the meantime, cottage peers have studied the newcomer carefully. In fact, most of their interaction with him is geared specifically to see how far the neophyte can be pushed. When the new boy walks into the cottage on that first day, his peers attempt to answer four basic questions about him: “How is he holding himself?” “How much does he have?” “Will he defend himself?” and “Is he a punk?” These questions are concerned with how fearful he is, what can be exploited from him (food, clothes, cigarettes, or sex), whether he will resist, and whether he has been sexually exploited in the past.

Being white, Johnny is approached by another white who walks up to him asking what his name is, where he is from, and what he is confined for. After feeling him out with these questions, this ‘new friend’ will probably ask him for a pack of cigarettes, promising to pay him back in the near future. But more than exploiting Johnny for a few cigarettes, the purpose of this initial contact is to set the newcomer up for later victimization and to see where he is going to fit in the pecking order of the cottage.

Regardless of the outcome of the interview, the new youth will probably not receive any support from other whites in his struggle to adjust to the institution.

The approach of the black youths is quite different. Engaged in a politics of scarcity because they usually have little or no money in the canteen account, they have greater need to exploit cigarettes and food.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, they are more direct and forceful than whites about extorting scarce items from this newcomer. Additionally, if sexual exploiters are present in the cottage, these youths will follow any possible avenue to sexually victimize newcomers. One bit of information which they eagerly seek is whether Johnny was sexually exploited in other institutions. But unquestionably, the success of the sexual exploiter depends largely upon his exploitative abilities. The most successful ones, for example, are subtle, constantly harassing passive youths and then waiting for a moment of weakness.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the newcomer who demonstrates strength will be left alone, but he must battle for some time with both sexual and non-sexual aggressors.

In his early days in the institution, Johnny likely will be exposed to the following types of victimization. He will sit down for lunch or dinner and another boy will walk up to him, pick up his dessert, and say, "You don't want your dessert, do you?" Unless he wants a fight, the new youth will know that his only possible answer is, "No, take it." Or a peer will walk up to a new boy and demand a cigarette, "Give me a square." Again, denying the request probably means a physical confrontation. On Saturday mornings, when the weekly canteen is open, the prizes will be even greater, for the canteen purchases are brought back to the cottages. Too often, item after item will disappear until the new and the weak lose all they have. Also, if Johnny returns to the cottage loaded down with pop and candy brought by parents, he will have his burden lifted as by magic. Afraid of the consequences, he may find denying any requests for food or desired goods difficult. Sometimes, the exploitation of newcomers will take more aggressive forms. For instance, Johnny may accidentally bump another peer. The likely result will be his being pushed aside or receiving a 'suckerpunch' (unexpected punch in the mouth or stomach). Of more serious consequences is that Johnny may be confronted daily by his peers, "You're a punk, aren't you?" or, "We heard what happened to you at Camp. . . . We all know you're a punk. You'd better give in, or we're going to hurt you." This type of harassment will occur especially if Johnny shows signs of weakness.

The preceding remarks represent a descriptive account of how it feels and what happens to many newcomers in an end-of-the-line maximum security institution for males in the Midwest. This institution is reserved for overly hostile and aggressive boys who range in age from 15 to 18 years. The population is divided nearly equally between black and white boys (49 percent are black and 51 percent are white). The majority of these youths have committed serious personal and property offenses and, as a group, average 2.4 commitments to state juvenile facilities. One-half have been diagnosed as dangerous to others and 20 percent as emotionally disturbed.

The boys are housed in eight cottages joined by corridors which connect school, vocational, and recreational areas. Each cottage contains 16 single rooms and two four-bed dormitories. In addition to this 24 boy sleeping area, a cottage includes dining and recreation areas, two offices for staff, a shower and bathroom. One social worker and six youth leaders make up the cottage's staff. Inmates are placed in an intake cottage for three or four weeks before they are assigned to their permanent cottages.

The cottage area is where boys spend most of their time – eating, sleeping, getting ready to go to other areas of the institution, and either playing pool, ping-pong, cards, or watching television. The school area, which is a five minute walk from the farthest cottages, contains academic classrooms and vocational shops, gymnasium, swimming pool, and auditorium. The six-year accredited high school runs for eleven months a year and is attended by most residents. One-half day is devoted to academic and one-half to vocational training, with the emphasis on vocational training. Eleven boys work full time at other youth commission facilities, usually in maintenance or at the food service center. Further, a few boys about to be released are allowed to work in the community. They leave for work in the morning and then return after the completion of their work day.

In conducting a study of victimization in this juvenile institution, we first went to several experienced staff members and asked them what they believed to be the most serious types of exploitation

among inmates. They suggested that food, clothes, and cigarettes were the primary items of property exploitation, while masturbation of others, oral and anal sodomy constituted the forms of sexual exploitation. Having constructed an initial typology, we then asked all of the youth leaders and social workers to rate each boy in the cottage on whether he exploited others, was never exploited, was exploited occasionally, or was exploited often. They were asked also to indicate the way each boy who was exploited was usually victimized.

Since we wanted to be able to differentiate the exploiters from the exploited, we analyzed the demographic, psychological, and physical characteristics as well as the criminal histories of all 150 residents. Specific factors examined included the number of previous commitments, number of previous offenses, and the seriousness of the offense leading to the present commitment. In addition, data on other characteristics including age at admission, IQ, and the weight and height of the boys were collected.

Two qualitative techniques were used in this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with certain staff members and with inmates who were identified as either extremely exploited or extreme exploiters. Also, nearly every staff member in the institution and the majority of the boys were talked with informally about exploitation. Participant observation was utilized to capture and depict social processes among boys. It was possible to use the approach of intensive observation and description of practical, everyday life to produce a picture of victimization in this institution because one researcher was employed there and a second spent considerable time in this facility.

The study of this institution revealed an inmate pecking order which defines who it is that becomes exploited. This exploitation matrix was very much affected by the social organization of the cottages, consisting of three or four different levels with the inmate leaders at the top, followed by the usual coterie of lieutenants.<sup>5</sup> A larger group of more passive youths constituted the third level and, in some cottages, the bottom rung of the ladder was occupied by one or more cottage scapegoats.

Second, our findings indicated clearly that whites were the most seriously exploited victims in this setting.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in every cottage, even though whites usually outnumbered blacks slightly, whites were clearly at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Further study indicated that the ruling position of blacks resulted not only in the exploitation of boys for cigarettes, food, clothing, and sex, but also in the socializing of whites into a black sub-culture. Through their prevailing position, blacks controlled the music played, the television programs watched, the kinds of food eaten, the style of clothing worn, and the language employed.

Third, our study revealed that 74 percent of the boys were exploited in some way, 16 percent exploited others but were not exploited, and only 10 percent were independent of the exploitation matrix in the institution. Interestingly, no significant differences appeared between the sexual and non-sexual exploiters on the factors of number of previous offenses, height, weight, number of previous commitments, or age at admission. The sexually exploited, however, were slightly younger, heavier, shorter, had fewer previous commitments to institutions, had fewer previous offenses than their peers, and were far more likely to be middle class.

Fourth, the inmate code appeared to be an especially important part of the inmate culture. The structural-physical setup, punitive goal orientation, and custodial emphasis of this training school resulted in boys banding together to thwart both rehabilitation and treatment. Thus, inmates developed conduct norms which regulated the socialization of all youths. This inmate code not only controlled inmate behavior, but oriented boys against the institution and its officials.

Fifth, our study showed that the quality of inmate life began to center around the labels assigned by the institution, its staff, and the inmate's peers.<sup>7</sup> In view of the extensiveness of boys' immersion in this sub-culture and the closeness of their contact with peers and staff, escape from the consequences of these labels was next to impossible.

Sixth, as reflected in the labels discussed in the preceding paragraph, it became clear that the inmate social structure contained several major and minor social roles. At the top of the social order were highly esteemed roles and at the bottom were the most unacceptable ones.<sup>8</sup> Lower roles, in particular, were very difficult to escape from once a boy accepted this role as his pattern of institutional behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Seventh, our study revealed that an increasing number of disturbed youths were being sent to this setting. Pressure from normal peers was constant and forceful and, unless staff were trained to be aware of their peculiar needs and personality patterns, emotionally disturbed youths found themselves on the bottom of the pecking order, often as sexual victims. Surprisingly, disturbed boys also ended up confined longer than normal boys who had committed much more serious crimes.<sup>10</sup>

Eighth, the self-serving ways of some staff appeared to make boys regard them as the enemy. Further, boys knew that by exploiting staff they could gain the approbation of peers and rise up in the inmate social order. Consequently, they played physical, psychological, therapeutic, educational, material, and theological games with staff members.<sup>11</sup>

The outstanding characteristics of this institution, then, are such that many youths find it threatening and painful. In fact, there are generally 50 runaways each year from this facility. For those who cannot escape, several other possible adaptations exist. They can become willing sexual victims, permitting others – sometimes even including staff – to perform unnatural sexual acts with them. Or, they can withdraw on drugs, constantly seeking some pressure-relieving chemicals.<sup>12</sup> Too, they can withdraw psychologically.<sup>13</sup> Also, boys may object so highly to this institutional structure that they challenge it. But for these angry inmates, the only reward is often a transfer to the adult reformatory. And finally, suicide is always a possibility.<sup>14</sup>

### *DELIVERANCE*

In this exploitation matrix, where the strong were dominant and the weak struggled for survival, there was in each cottage at least one staff member who created amazing rapport with boys and was able to mitigate significantly the amount of victimization which took place in his cottage. These staff members had certain characteristics in common. They were all black, para-professional, experienced in this institution (usually five years or more), older (later thirties or older), stable in their family and financial lives, and successful parents in their own right. Another important characteristic of these men was that they grew up in Christian homes, and nearly all of them were raised in the church, attending Sunday school and church weekly as a child. Although working one shift three Sundays out of four made it difficult to have an active church relationship, two were lay ministers, one had been a church officer, and one sang in the church choir. Therefore, four of the ten had some active leadership role in the church, while the majority of the others attended occasionally.

After considerable reflection, it is my conclusion that the unique success of these men stemmed from their implementation, both consciously and unconsciously, of basic values which find their roots in the Christian faith. A careful analysis reveals that themes central only to Christianity are woven into the work of these men. Indeed, the underlying Christian nature of their approach – stemming from the subconscious formative influence of Christianity in their lives – is clearly indicated from a study of the men's specific methods. These methods fit neatly into a framework which may be legitimately interpreted as uniquely Christian, a framework which is delineated in the remainder of this article.

First, the successful staff members communicate a special message to their boys which is rich in the overtones of Christ's Gospel. Initially, these staff members inform newcomers on their first day that their past criminal records will not be held against them. Regardless of what the boy has done, whether murdering his mother or raping an elderly lady, he is still told that this is day one for him and that he has a chance to begin anew. In spite of the fact that other staff members may hold boys' past behavior against them, these particular staff are saying that these boys have an opportunity to change their lives and begin over. Hence, they are not judged from their past, but from their behavior in the present and the future. Theologically, this is closely related to the new dispensation of the Gospel, in which Christ offers forgiveness and restoration.

Another approach of these staff is to direct their youths not to victimize their fellow inmates. In an inmate society in which victimization is the norm, these particular staff members hold their charges responsible for refraining from exploitation. Even when their boys suffer from the lack of desired commodities which others have in abundance, they insist there is no justification for the strong taking

from the weak. In effect, these staff are informing their boys that the old law is past, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” and a new law has come which forbids taking advantage of those who are trying to take advantage of you.

Next, these leaders expect their charges to be responsible for their behavior. Typically, these boys have never been responsible for their behavior, always rationalizing or neutralizing what they have done. Often requiring their charges to sign a contract defining acceptable and non-acceptable behavior – a contract which is mutually drawn up by both boys and staff – staff members expect boys to be responsible for the goals which they have set. Of interest also, these staff members frequently request that the stronger inmates protect the weaker ones from being exploited, actually making them their brother’s keeper. This, of course, relates to the new law that Christians love one another as they love themselves.

Further, they direct their boys not to permit themselves to be victimized. These staff members, almost none of whom have more than a high school education, are quite concerned about the self-esteem of their boys. They know that a good self-concept will help insulate these youths from delinquency in the future.<sup>15</sup> Some, for example, actively generate positive success experiences for cottage residents. Again, one of the values of the Christian faith is that the new man in Christ receives the good news that he is accepted. As an accepted child of God, he has worth and significance; his very being takes on a new dignity.

A second feature of the Christian framework into which these leaders fit is the way in which these successful men exemplify in their personal lives certain Christian characteristics. First, in an acutely conscious racial inmate society, these men have the admirable trait of making both black and white inmates feel equally acceptable. In spite of being black and having been discriminated against to some degree by white society, these men reach out to all, seeking to provide encouragement and guidance to whoever needs it. That is to say, in emulation of Christ who preached the Gospel to both Gentile and Jew, there is no racism in how these men respond to their charges.

Also, although primarily responsible as custodial agents to inmates, these men spend a great deal of time talking with cottage residents. This is particularly important because so many of these boys have difficulty talking with any adult, including their social worker. Thus, even though they are pressed by many other duties, these staff members communicate to their boys that they are important as persons. When the seriousness of many of their crimes is remembered, this type of response is especially impressive. All of this is reminiscent of Jesus, who spent his time with sinners, such as Mary Magdalene, treating them as fully worthy of his Kingdom, despite the availability of persons ostensibly more respectable.

Additionally, in a milieu in which staff members have an informal code to beat the system, these men do an honest day’s work.<sup>16</sup> This means that they are involved with their jobs, particularly concerned about the growth of boys and their eventual successful community adjustment. They do not take excessive sick time, nor do they shirk their responsibilities in supervising boys. What makes this so important is that sexual exploitation often takes place in this institution simply due to staff’s failure in supervising their charges. In a real sense, then, these men are good shepherds, who, are watching their sheep. They are serving as faithful pastors to their flock.

Finally, these staff members are willing to take risks for their charges. Obviously, there is considerable risk when boys are sent home on weekend visits or are assigned to outside jobs where they leave the institution in the morning and return at night. Since this is a maximum security institution, staff know that they will be reprimanded when a youth fails to return to the institution; nevertheless, they continually take chances on boys, communicating to them that they are trustworthy.<sup>17</sup> Christ, if viewed for a moment as a caseworker, constantly kept the motif of service in his relationships with others, a service which in the deepest sense of his mission involved risk and sacrifice. For Christ, it led to the cross; for these leaders, it sometimes leads to loss of wages or even termination.

The third feature of the Christian framework under consideration here is the promise of a special future which these successful men instill in their boys, a promise which is fulfilled only upon an unconditionally free response on the part of the juveniles. Indeed, one consequence of staff’s involvement with these boys is that staff expect inmates to be honest with them. As previously stated, boys in this

setting play games and manipulate other staff; however, the particular staff cited in this study expect a much different type of response. Unquestionably, it is not always easy to control these older and aggressive delinquents without utilizing physical force. These inmates have grown up in a violent society, and have grown used to responding to the probability or reality of violence. Yet, in contrast to other staff who coerce, threaten, intimidate, and sometimes even fight to control their youths, these exemplary staff choose to pursue a trusting and honest relationship with cottage residents without using physical force. Of interest here is that they have far fewer problems with boys than other staff members and that residents feel they can talk with them about what is really bothering them.<sup>18</sup> Certainly consistent with the approach of Christ, these staff members are asking to be trusted, fully aware that this faith response carries with it obvious responsibilities on both sides.

Finally, these staff members spend considerable time with cottage residents helping them plan for their future. Without a doubt, the released delinquent returning to the community has many strikes against him. Some of these are related to his lack of education, lack of job experience or trade, lack of references, and history of failure. In addition, he may have conflict at home, a poor reputation in the community, and friends just waiting to involve him again in their criminogenic pursuits. Consequently, his obstacles are overwhelming and his resources are limited. Quite aware of all these potential problems, these staff members encourage their boys to do everything possible to increase their chances for a successful community adjustment. Several of these methods are encouraging them to complete their high school education, learn a trade, pass the high school equivalency test, resolve problems with parents, find jobs when they go home on visits, keep away from anti-social friends, and be realistic about their style of life in the community. It is not difficult to see an analogy between the delinquent's adjustment to a positive role in the outside community and a Christian's pilgrimage toward the Kingdom of God. As Christ has done for man, these staff members seek to act as mediators in order to make the transition not only smooth, but actually possible.

Not surprisingly, these ten experienced youth leaders do not reach every youth in this maximum security institution, as evidenced by the amount of victimization which takes place in this institution. And, in fact, they often fall short of their own ideals, violating some of the values stated here. Nevertheless, It is extremely significant that any of these boys – most of whom have either been labelled as sociopathic or incorrigible – can be reached at all. For instance, few if any of these boys have ever responded warmly to staff members in other youth commission facilities. Indeed, a great many of these boys have never responded to any male role figure. But these remarkable men develop trusting, warm relationships with many boys in their cottages, and, in turn, are called *father* by many of these youths. What is particularly important here is that many of these boys have never known a father.

When release day comes and boys say goodbye to those men, tears are often in boys' eyes and occasionally in the eyes of their mentors. Too, each week or so one of these staff members receives a visitor – a boy who has driven half way across this Midwestern state to see him. Frequently, a letter or phone call will be forthcoming from 'graduates' to these staff members. Sometimes, they bring news, but at other times, released youths are again reaching out for help and advice. One of the central teachings of Christ was that God is a father and that redemption is available for whoever will respond, and in their own way these youth leaders try to be a father to their boys.

In conclusion, we have described a maximum security institution, in which nearly three-quarters of the inmates are victimized in some way. In the midst of this repressive and anti-Christian environment, ten staff members have attempted to relate to their cottage residents with quite different values, values consistent with and at least unconsciously derived from Christianity. Condemned by society and incarcerated in an end-of-the-line institution, these boys were given the good news that life could begin anew by persons who cared and gave them the promise of a new future. In a real sense, they were ministered to by little Christs who tried to bring them the precious gift of a better life.

Finally, it is not too much to suggest that this institution is a microcosm of contemporary society. Clearly, we live in a society in which victimization is rampant, while impersonality and depreciation prevail in human relationships. As a result, many feel worthless or unloved. Since these values are too often dominant on the American scene, we must be about the business of transforming the lives of men.

The youth leaders described in this article, regardless of the quality of their personal religious faith, teach us all a valuable lesson: the wounds of man can be healed only by an army of little Christs. Indeed, we have the most effective caseworker of all time as our example. In imitating Him alone can we present an example and a promise which will free man from bondage and captivity and help man to receive the gift of abundant life in the Kingdom of God.

## NOTES

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\*The data from this study is taken from a larger study of victimization. See Stuart J. Miller, Clemens Bartollas, and Simon Dinitz, *Victimization: The Exploitation Paradox of a Juvenile Institution*, to be published under the joint imprint of Sage and Halsted Press (a division of John Wiley and Sons, Inc.).

<sup>1</sup>In this state, there are ten male institutions, and the one studied here is reserved for boys who are considered too aggressive or who abscond from other facilities of the youth commission.

<sup>2</sup>Staff of the other male institutions appear to spread the rumors to frighten their charges into conforming to their institutional programs.

<sup>3</sup>Each Saturday, the institution operates a canteen in which boys can purchase candy, pop, cigarettes, and other items. However, only boys whose parents have placed money in their canteen account can avail themselves of what the canteen has to offer.

<sup>4</sup>Sexual exploiters in this institution are called *booty bandits*.

<sup>5</sup>Inmate leaders in this institution are called *heavies*.

<sup>6</sup>Of the 16 boys who were chronic sexual victims, 13 were white.

<sup>7</sup>The most popular inmate's labels are *weakminded*, *chump*, *ass kisser*, *punk*, *crazy*, *bad dude*, and *alright guy*. The most popular staff's labels are *pain freak*, *booty bandit*, *bogarting*, *punk* and *he will never make it*.

<sup>8</sup>From top to bottom are the heavy, the lieutenant, the slick, the boy who profits, the booty bandit, the peddler, the messup, the thief, the queen, and the scapegoat.

<sup>9</sup>Only one scapegoat in three, for instance, is able to improve his lowly status. See Clemens Bartollas and Stuart J. Miller and Simon Dinitz, *Becoming a Scapegoat: A Study of a Deviant Career*, in *Sociological Symposium*, 11 (Spring of 1974), pp. 74-89.

<sup>10</sup>Up until the last three years, disturbed youths were confined for at least a year longer than the average inmate, but this has decreased to a few months.

<sup>11</sup>Physical games are designed to control staff which in turn gives peers more freedom in the institution. Psychological games are played to direct hostility toward staff. Therapeutic, educational, and theological games are all played primarily to expedite one's release. See Stuart J. Miller, Clemens Bartollas, and Simon Dinitz, *Games Inmates Play: Notes on Staff Victimization* in *Victimization: A New Focus* (eds. Viano and Drapkin), Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, in press.

<sup>12</sup>One boy, for example, became so high on constant glue sniffing that brain damage occurred, and he died shortly afterwards.

<sup>13</sup>Some boys have withdrawn so completely that they have had to be transferred to the state hospital, and occasionally there was so much violence in their psychological withdrawal that strait jackets had to be used.

<sup>14</sup>Although there have been only two successful suicides in the history of the institution, nearly every month – with varying degrees of seriousness – a boy tries to hurt himself. Only the quick reaction of staff forestalls some of these attempts.

<sup>15</sup>Walter Reckless and Simon Dinitz have done considerable research on how the good self-concept insulates a boy from delinquent behavior. See Walter C. Reckless and Simon Dinitz, *The Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1972.

<sup>16</sup>See Clemens Bartollas, Stuart J. Miller, and Simon Dinitz, *Staff Exploitation of Inmates: The Paradox of Institutional Control* in *Victimization: A New Focus* (see note 11 above).

<sup>17</sup>Reprimands can vary from a verbal or written one from his supervisors, to suspension for several days to up to a month without pay, or even to termination. The degree of punishment depends upon how much the youth leader has violated security in his supervision of inmates.

<sup>18</sup>See Clemens Bartollas, Stuart J. Miller, and Simon Dinitz, *Boys Who Profit: The Limits of Institutional Success*, a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology (November of 1974), unpublished.