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Editor: H. C. GUNZBURG

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EDITORIAL

A DOCUMENTARY

Subject: "Normalisation in Action"

Scene: The canteen of a cross channel ferry.

Time: Summer -lunchtime.

Cast: (a) Approximately twenty-five m.h. adults, classifiable as moderate and mildly handicapped.

(b) Some ten members of staff, presumably nurses (male and female).

(c) A large crowd of holiday travellers, among them the writer and his wife; staff of the canteen.

Synopsis:

A long queue of passengers has been waiting patiently for a considerable time without moving forward. Service for them has been stopped. The m.h. people are seated in groups of four in the bays of the dining room. They stare straight ahead or down at the table, scarcely exchanging an occasional word.

Staff are extremely busy with laying the table and pouring out drinks. They form a human chain and pass the full plates from the servery to the tables. Despite their efficient team-work, vastly facilitated by serving to everyone the same lunch of beefburgers and chips, as well as the same sweet course, the operation is time-consuming. The m.h. people eat, however, steadily and very tidily, and contribute to the smooth execution of the proceedings by neither engaging in conversation nor being detracted by their unfamiliar surroundings.

Immediately after serving the sweet course to the last of their charges, the human chain is redirected to passing a choice of various lunches, sweets and drinks to the tables reserved for staff. Once this has been completed a jolly, relaxed holiday atmosphere with joking and telling stories commences among the various groups of members of staff.

During the time of serving, the audience of hungry travellers watch, fascinated, with true British stoicism, the dedicated work of the care staff. They also observe the disciplined departure of the whole crowd from the dining room.

They leave the canteen in an orderly, easily guided column of two's, and it is easy to forecast a guaranteed trouble-free holiday for the staff.

The public, most of whom were probably only vaguely aware of the nature of the handicap involved, were obviously much impressed with the efficiency of the care services demonstrated by this episode and they may well have reasoned that the ensuing delay in having their own lunches was of still shorter duration than if those seemingly very incompetent people had been queuing up in the ordinary way. No doubt, the m.h. if they had been aware of the possible choice between queuing up or being served at the table, would surely have opted for the latter, as would all of us, who can afford waiter service. The staff again, fully aware of the existence of an alternative but used to this type of work, would be well satisfied with the smooth precision of the operation.

So why then, were at least two spectators so unhappy about many aspects of a procedure which was so convenient for everyone concerned?

It was convenient for the passengers not to be impeded longer than necessary in their quest for food. It was convenient for the staff to expedite the feeding operation rather than to assist in self-service attempts, and it was also convenient for the staff to snatch a lunchbreak for themselves rather than with their unresponsive charges. The whole incident illustrated vividly that it is quite possible to transfer institutional practices, which have proved so convenient in the past, to so-called "normal" life situations. It is an instructive example of "window-dressing Normalisation" which camouflages the essential "business as usual" attitude of many participants.

Unchanged outlook was obviously responsible for the leadership of the institution failing to alter its practices "at home" before embarking on a venture abroad, as well as for the staff omitting to engage in training programmes which would have familiarised their charges with "normal situations." Unchanged outlook was responsible for organising a rapid and efficient waiter service for everyone rather than giving the more proficient members of the group an opportunity of joining the other travellers in the queue. Unchanged outlook denied the mentally handicapped the opportunity to lay the tables and pour the drinks. Unchanged outlook resulted in staff eating apart from the "patients" and depriving these people thereby of the opportunity to use their "community skills" and to observe normal table habits. Of course, there are good reasons for not changing practices which have been found convenient and expedient. They are rationalised by reference to the very principle of "normalisation" even though they effectively undermine it e.g. waiter service is "normal," and "waiters" do not eat with those they are waiting on.

The failure of taking advantage of the opportunities offered by normal life, is not limited to the institutions the bastions of traditional practices. The informal and useful approach to learning communicative and socialising skills which could provide the companionship around the dining table is neglected by 57% of Adult Training Centres¹ where staff eat segregated from the trainees. The vast majority of the ATCs also fails to offer the trainees opportunities for choosing their own meals (only 6.6% do this!!). Only 8.5% of trainees are paying personally for their meals, which may help in making them aware of the cost of their food.

The failure of developing a unified approach to the educational and training task of furthering self-sufficiency in all areas is reflected by a tendency to avoid taking risks in certain essential life situations. For example, even though the people in charge consider 27.5% of their trainees capable of using public transport, only 14.5% actually use such form of transport for travelling to and from the Centre.

Closer inspection of practices throughout this country - and indeed every country this writer has visited - reveal many occasions when the most obvious, natural opportunities for learning and practising, have been avoided, circumvented and overlooked. Authorities, management and staff are far more inclined to embark on elaborate, costly and showy training schemes which give the impression that they go with the times, than to institute helpful living practices which are so natural and normal, that they would fail to draw the attention of the casual observer. It is, of course, far more spectacular and likely to attract support if a whole group of people are shifted for their holidays to France or Spain, than if individual people learn to enjoy themselves by exercising full and independent control over their environment in which they feel secure.

The main reason for wasted and misdirected efforts, for missing out on opportunities offered by life itself and for limiting oneself to teaching and training only in certain, well defined situations, is a failure in thinking through and working out the implications of a philosophy of Normalisation, which has frequently been adopted primarily on an emotional level. In this philosophy it will be essential to apply its principle not only to the attractive and exciting proposition of a foreign holiday, but also to the queuing up for food as thousands of other normal channelferry passengers have to do. To acquire such a humdrum, unspectacular skill as well as other similar skills, requires a good deal of preparatory work before the event and also the elimination of habitual and convenient practices. It is here that the real effectiveness of new ideas could be demonstrated by ousting obsolescent living practices. The new approach must not be emasculated by confining it to the shifting of mentally handicapped people to different chairs in different places in different countries.

¹ The information on Adult Training Centres is culled from: Whelan, E. and Speake, B. (1977), *Adult Training Centres in England and Wales*. London, NATMH.