

THE CHANNELING OF AGGRESSION
AND
THE FUNCTION OF CONFLICT IN A NUDIST CAMP

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Lewis Coser in his book Functions of Social Conflict has commented on the lack of concern modern sociologists have shown in a study of conflict and their assumption that conflict represents a social pathology threatening disorganization or dissolution of the society.¹

This paper will explore the function of conflict within a small divergent group in American society, a nudist camp, and will attempt to illustrate the institutional mechanisms for containing aggression and channeling it into constructive social conflict to strengthen the group. The nudist group provides an interesting area of study, not only because of its radical divergence from the values of the larger American society, but also because the philosophy of the movement holds that the association of persons in the nude in a social and recreational context largely precludes interpersonal tensions because the absence of clothing removes many of the causes of interpersonal tensions in our society.

While the writer is not concerned with the validity of these claims, he did observe, in the course of some twenty visits ranging from a few hours to several days, that the atmosphere of the camp was one of relaxed, friendly good fellowship, thus supporting statements made by nudist leaders and the nudist press. Only after having been a member of the club for several months was it possible to note that there were, in fact, hostilities between persons and groups within the camp. On a psychological level, the suggestion has been made that in American society clothing carries with it a number of built-in role identifications which can be ignored when a person is nude. Thus the aggressiveness which is at least an implied aspect of the male role in the United States may well be left on the clothes hanger along with the trousers, the shirt which buttons on the left, and other distinctly male attire.

On a functional level it is clear that open interpersonal conflict would belie the claims which attract new members to the nudist movement. Aggressive impulses consequently must be repressed in the overall interest of the movement. This repression would probably result in frustration if no other outlet could be found for the aggressive impulses; such a constant frustration would again repel members and weaken the movement.

Coser points out that, because conflict in closely integrated groups tends to be more intense and more of a threat to group solidarity than in less integrated groups, there is a tendency in the former to suppress conflict more vigorously or to channel it toward substitute objects.

Although the nudist group is purely associational and voluntary (except perhaps for children introduced to nudism by parents) it is nonetheless an intimate group. The secluded location of the camp, the careful screening of newcomers, the shared divergent values, all combine to make the nudist population more intimate than, let us say, the population of a week-end vacation area on the Russian River. The very fact of nudity, which makes it necessary to don clothing in order to leave the camp, adds to the feeling of group distinctiveness and solidarity.

We must now examine the conflict potential of the nudist group and compare it with that of similar groups. While there are a number of conflict potentials in the simple interaction of people in a recreational activity such as yelling and loud talking, unsafe or annoyingly boisterous behavior in the swimming pool, ignoring rules observed by the rest of the population, it would seem that they are no greater conflict potentials within a nudist camp than they are, let us say, on a public beach or at a country club. Within the nudist camp there are, however, a number of conflict potentials which are unique to the situation. All nudists are aware that most outsiders view their activities as erotic, immoral, and probably pathological. They are concerned about the opinion of the larger society and sensitive to any behavior on the part of a fellow nudist which would tend to confirm the opinion generally held of the movement. Nudists do not share, as nudists, a common code of moral standards, if we except their belief. While they believe that association in the nude is right, proper, and morally defensible, they differ radically on other aspects of behavior. In the camp visited by the writer there were members with views as far apart as those of the Bohemian avant garde and of Christian fundamentalism. An illustration of this diversity is seen in the problem of social dancing. Some members, particularly those from Europe, where the practice is common, hold that people should be allowed to dance in the nude just as they play volleyball in the nude. There are other members, a distinct minority, who feel that dancing in itself is not a totally moral activity. Between these extremes there is a wide range of opinions. Common nudist practice is to permit dancing, but only when clothed, and the American Subathing Association will not admit to affiliation any camp which permits dancing in the nude. The more liberal nudist decries this as hypocrisy, while the fundamentalist sadly comments that by succumbing to the lure of dancing even nudists are not as moral as they ought to be. Yet, in order to continue to enjoy nudist activity, both groups are forced to suppress their own views to the extent of accepting the rules as they are and not attempting to force their own standards on the camp as a whole.

The problem of potential conflict existing in any situation involving moral attitudes is commonly resolved by the avoidance of delicate subjects when persons with diverging views are in contact. While nudists often engage in lengthy and illuminating discussions on morality, society, and values, such conversations are usually held in the privacy of a trailer or cabin in the evening and the participants are generally friendly toward one another's views. When conflicts over standards have appeared on the surface of the nudist movement the usual result has been a schism, and the establishment of a new camp, or, on a national level, a new organization.

There are, then, within the nudist camp two sources of conflict, the ordinary irritations of personal interaction and the more basic differences of opinion outlined above. Although in the interest of the movement these conflicts must not be allowed to express themselves in direct aggressive behavior, they must nevertheless be given some outlet in order to reduce frustration. There are three broad areas toward which aggression could be directed without threatening the cohesion of the group:

(1) Hostility could be directed toward substitute objects in the clothed life of the member outside the camp. His family, pets, fellow workers, employers or employees could become targets for the aggressive tendencies suppressed while at camp. Although this redirection may actually occur, any discussion of the home and occupational life of nudists without investigation would be purely speculative and unrewarding.²

(2) Hostility could be directed toward the outside clothed world regarded as a non-understanding persecutor. There is some evidence to support the idea that this was the case in the early phases of nudism in this country and abroad. The movement tended to be militant and crusading, demanded total involvement of the personality of its members, dictated diet and behavior in the most minute detail, held itself aloof from society, and willingly involved itself in legal conflict. However, at the present time, and particularly in this country, nudism no longer demands total involvement, and offers no solution to world problems, seeking instead to relate to other organizations and to gain the acceptance of the outer world.

There is a great deal of interaction between the camp studied and the clothed community. The camp facilities include a large clubroom which is utilized by the local community association;² the local Boy Scout groups are invited to swim at the camp; the county sheriff usually has a patrol in the area to protect the camp's privacy; and the local courts fine "snoopers" severely. To direct hostility toward the community would certainly not be in the best interest of the camp.

(3) The final alternative, then, is to channel conflict within the camp but without disturbing the tranquillity and friendliness which are so important to retaining old members and attracting new ones. In short, conflict must be channeled in such a way that it does not appear to be conflict at all.

It might be added here that having shown that conflict does exist (a point to be illustrated in detail later) one must assume that a corresponding frustration will develop unless conflict is expressed. The fact that many members have continued nudist activity in one camp for a quarter of a century and that newcomers become extremely enthusiastic is evidence that the frustrations are effectively dealt with.

Before discussing actual conflict situations within the nudist group the setting of the camp and its organization will be described. Sunshine Lodge is located in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay area, sufficiently close to the main population centers to attract city dwellers who are able to stay in camp only a day as well as those who wish to spend an entire weekend there. Its total area is 124 acres of typical coast range country, hilly and in some areas heavily

covered with scrub oak and brush. Most activity takes place in an area of about 20 acres which contains the gate house, auto and trailer parking areas, club house, guest lodge, rental cabins, swimming pool and volley ball courts. A short distance from the center of activity is "the village," a collection of privately owned cabins built by members on land rented from the camp.

The group was formed in 1936 as a cooperative club, members contributing dues toward the expense of operating the camp on what was then an abandoned farm. Since that time the property has been purchased by a nudist who operates the camp as a private club. Although he admits that the camp may never become a profitable enterprise, every effort is made to "break even." Members, who are first screened by the manager, pay dues and ground fees for the use of the camp facilities. The owner employs a couple who live at the camp and manage the property. Shortly before the close of the 1957 season a caretaker was employed to assist the managing couple.

While major decisions of policy are made by the management, the membership has a strong voice in these decisions through its own political structure. The members annually elect officers and a board of directors which meets at regular intervals to plan various club activities and to advise the management on practices desired by the membership. Twice a year the entire membership participates in a meeting at which questions of policy are discussed.

Nudists are apt to describe their legislative sessions as "crazy", "hot", or "wild", and my own observation supports the contention that such meetings do engender a high degree of emotion. It often seemed that the emotional pitch was considerably higher than was warranted by the subject under discussion. The only occasion on which open hostility or at least verbal aggression was observed resulted from a disputed matter of procedure before the board of directors. One of the individuals involved protested so violently that he threatened to resign. Nudist politics appear to take on the same emotional cast. The writer was present at the 1957 national convention and was impressed by the intensity with which the various committees and boards discussed what appeared on the surface to be questions of little real import.³

Before attempting to relate the behavior of the residents of Sunshine Lodge to the theoretical discussion above, it would be well to examine actual incidents which could have developed into openly hostile and aggressive behavior in a non-nudist situation to see how they were handled within the nudist group.

The Visiting Photographer

On an early visit to the camp we were introduced to a male nudist from an Asian country who appeared to be extremely popular with the members. Because he was returning to his homeland he had been granted permission to take photographs of the activities at Sunshine Lodge to show to nudists in his country. Subsequently several persons felt that some of the poses he had requested of women members had been improper.⁴ To our knowledge he was not confronted directly before he left for home. The incident, however, was not forgotten, and it was apparent that it had generated a great deal of emotion and resentment.

The incident was made the focal point for a demand that new rules concerning the use of cameras within the camp be formulated. This proposal was brought up at a general membership meeting, which was, according to informants, rather heated. A new and very complex set of rules was decided on, forbidding the use of cameras to visitors or to new members for sixty days after they were admitted to the camera club, instructed in proper photography, and issued an identifying arm-band.

It should be noted here that the subject of photography within a camp is an extremely "hot" issue among nudists, many feeling that the practice should be prohibited altogether. I did not meet anyone who advocated unrestricted use of the camera, but several persons expressed resentment at what they consider unfair restriction of the rights of photographic hobbyists. Some nudists, while admitting that it should be acceptable for nudists to take snapshots of their activities, frown on posed photographs. Amateur photographers, on the other hand, insist that by taking artfully posed nudes they are helping the nudist cause by showing the human body as an esthetically pleasing object.

There are a number of reasons behind this conflict of opinion. Probably the most important is the fact that photographs taken within a nudist camp can, and apparently have in the past, fallen into the wrong hands, with resultant embarrassment to the nudist involved and to the movement as a whole. Further objections are related to legal considerations which limit the pictorial display of the nude body and might embroil the individual nudist or the movement in legal difficulties. In talking to some nudists I have gained the distinct impression that they accept nudity as moral and proper but somehow feel that being photographed in the nude is not the same sort of thing.

The incident of the visiting photographer brought this subject to the fore and provided an opportunity for a clash between the photographers and the non-photographers.

The Guest Lodge Kitchen

The facilities at Sunshine Lodge include a converted farmhouse which serves as a lodge in which members rent rooms. It has a common kitchen, shower and toilet facilities. Because toilet facilities are apt to be crowded in the trailer parking area during certain periods and because day visitors have nowhere to cook, many members who were not renting rooms in the lodge used its toilet and kitchen. This caused members who had rented rooms to resent the inconvenience. Persons who had used the facilities of the lodge without renting rooms seemed not to be conscious of this resentment, and appeared genuinely surprised when a rule was announced prohibiting members, other than those who rented rooms in the lodge, from using the kitchen and toilet facilities. It may well have been that overt resentment was present but it was of such a mild nature that it could be ignored without discomfort. The rule was a result of a complaint to the management by a member who rented a room in the lodge. In this incident we again see a conflict potential which did not develop into direct confrontation of the parties involved, but which was resolved by taking the problem to the management to be settled by a policy decision.

The Tattooed Man

On a visit early in the summer we noticed a male visitor, outstanding because of extensive tattooing which covered his entire body below the neck and above the wrists. He appeared to be the guest of an older member who was not known to us.

Our fortunate location on the sundeck enabled us to overhear the conversation of a group of young people in their middle and late teens. The visitor's appearance, particularly when it was noticed that his buttocks and genitalia were decorated, elicited from the youngsters a number of shocked and angry comments. "He must be crazy," remarked a boy. "How in the world did he get in here? I'll bet Emilie (the manager) didn't know he looked like that," said a girl of about 15 years. Adults around the pool could not help but notice the colorful figure but their attitude was one of puzzled amusement rather than hostility. There was, however, very little effort made to draw him into conversation or other activities.

The visitor soon made himself even more conspicuous, definitely upsetting the tranquillity of the pool and sunning area. His first move was to stop a passer-by who was walking a dog on a leash and release the animal, although this was against the camp rules. When the owner protested mildly he jocularly ignored her requests to let the dog alone until a woman of his own group "scolded" him.

Shortly after the incident of the dog the tattooed man pushed the same young woman into the swimming pool. This act was expressly forbidden on grounds of safety and seldom committed except by children. It also required his placing his hands on the victim which constituted a further violation of accepted nudist conduct. Although the woman was extremely sensitive to being surprised in this manner, and always entered the pool from the shallow end to avoid the sudden shock of cold water, she did not protest. Instead she smiled (without much sincerity, it must be admitted) and ignored the tattooed man. Other persons who witnessed the pushing incident expressed resentment in subdued voices and the woman's husband referred to the tattooed man as a "knucklehead."

The tattooed man then pushed a four-year-old girl playing near the shallow end of the swimming pool into the water. The surprise of the sudden fall sent the child into tears. The nudists present expressed their resentment even more fully than on the previous occasion, but again, no one confronted the transgressor. The child's father, one of the camp officials, came to the scene, quieted his daughter, and listed to the embarrassed apologies of the tattooed man while depreciating the child's wails.

Soon after this incident John, the manager, appeared at the pool and spoke quietly to the tattooed man, who disappeared a few minutes later and apparently left the camp. We were unable to learn whether he had been ordered to leave, or merely told to stop the behavior described. The nudists who had witnessed the incidents took it for granted that the manager had ordered him out of the camp and expressed the attitude that "it served him right."

As in the case of the guest lodge kitchen, a situation which engendered hostile emotions was referred to the management for settlement.

The Loud Radio

One of the rules of the camp forbade radios in the vicinity of the swimming pool. When questioning members about this rule we found that a number of them resented the restriction but did not protest because "we don't want to stir up anything." Further questioning disclosed that several years earlier a group of young people had brought a radio to the pool area and played it rather loudly. I could not learn whether the radio players had been asked to tune their machine down. The music did, however, annoy one member enough for him to introduce a motion at the next meeting of the board of directors forbidding radios at the pool.

Here again is a problem which would have been approached on a purely personal level in most other social groups -- i.e., by a direct request to the offending party that the radio be turned down, but which was taken directly to the legislative machinery of the camp to be remedied by an overall rule.

The four situations described represent the most common type of conflict potential developed within the camp. With the exception of the case of the photographer, the incidents had very little to do with basic philosophy or attitudes but revolved around personal irritations. The incidents have a number of factors in common:

1. No attempt was made by the injured parties to confront the offender directly.
2. In spite of obviously hostile attitudes every attempt was made to maintain a tranquil and friendly atmosphere.
3. The first impulse in resolving the problem was to refer it either to the management or to the political structure of the camp.

One can theorize from these facts that the political-administrative organization of the nudist camp serves not only an organizational and directive function, but is in fact a channel for aggressive impulses. Where some type of aggressive behavior involving direct confrontation is necessary, as in the case of the tattooed man, the role of aggressor appears to have been institutionalized in the manager and his wife.

Summary and Discussion

A nudist camp is a social group marked by a highly specialized value orientation toward the exposure of the body, and because of this divergency its members are spatially and ideologically cut off from full participation in the larger American society, at least part of the time. Because the continued existence of nudism depends on the willingness of the larger society to permit the exercise of these divergent activities it is necessary for the nudist movement to attempt to relate to that society whenever possible and to suppress hostility directed toward the latter. Because the appeals to potential

members are based largely on the fact that there is an absence of interpersonal tension in a nudist camp, open hostility and aggression of even a mild sort would tend to discourage new members and slow or even stop the growth of the movement.

There is greater intimacy within the nudist camp than in a similar vacation spot in the clothed world as a result of semi-permanent residence patterns, the physical isolation of the camp, and the very nature of nudist activity which isolates nudists from the rest of the world. Potential conflict must be repressed severely lest it rupture the relationships and stability of this intimate group. However, conflict potentials do develop within the nudist camp which, if not expressed, would certainly develop a frustration which in itself would be dysfunctional.

The solution is to disguise conflict and aggressive impulses in behavioral forms not commonly thought of as reflecting hostility, or in ones in which conflict can be permitted without disrupting the general pattern of tranquil relationships among members. In the case of the nudist it appears that the political-administrative structure of the organization has been used for this purpose.

By bringing situations directly into the political arena the nudist avoids direct confrontation of the object of his aggressive impulses. Moreover, it is possible within this framework to discuss the matter in terms of issues about conduct rather than in terms of specific behavior or specific individuals. Thus in the matter of the photographer the heated membership meeting allowed the problem to be discussed as a question of rules about cameras rather than as a remedy for a particular violation. In effect, the nudist is doing precisely what the average citizen calls for when he expresses his frustration and irritation by saying, "There ought to be a law..."

Up to now the discussion has dealt with the mechanisms of channeling conflict within the nudist group. There remains the question of how conflict contributes to the strength of the nudist group, particularly in light of the fact that such conflict would almost always be in contradiction of expressed nudist philosophy. It appears to the writer that conflict makes two major contributions without which the nudist movement could not survive.

The basic views of what is proper or moral behavior vary widely among nudists, and serve as potential sources of conflict. But, on the other hand, when the nudists' shared belief in the benefit of nudist activity is threatened, it is these very divergent values which can be set aside to enable the group to form a common front. This proposition is best illustrated on a national level. The two major nudist organizations resulted from a schism which occurred because of basic differences in philosophy and extremely heated personal animosities. Although these differences still exist, both groups tend to cooperate whenever nudism is threatened, as by the arrest of nudists under indecent exposure statutes, or by attempts to suppress nudist publications as obscene. Then the outer boundaries of the movement are drawn, the lines beyond which the factional differences are irrelevant because the rest of the world seems to oppose all nudism.

A second function of conflict is the provision of leadership. By and large

the activities of the average nudist camp require little aggressive leadership. While new members are welcomed and anyone displaying interest is earnestly solicited, membership drives are not practical. Since most nudist camps are located in areas where there is little local opposition, leadership in the legal defense of nudist activity is largely uncalled for on the local level. The normal activities of nudist camps, sports field days, and "festivals" require a certain degree of organization, but hardly tax the abilities of the dynamic leader. On the national level, however, a certain number of aggressive, hard-working and enthusiastic nudist leaders are essential. These people bind together the various camps and clubs, carry legal battles from the local courts to the higher levels of the judicial system, organize active public relations campaigns, communicate with nudists in other countries, and, in general, give nudism the appearance of a genuine social movement.

Such leaders would find little inspiration in the routine legislative and administrative tasks of a nudist camp if it were not for the underlying tension engendered by the channeling of interpersonal conflict into the political sphere. For example, if the question of the photographer had first been handled by personal confrontation and only later by an attempt to formulate rules, it is doubtful that the meeting called on the subject would have been so emotionally charged. It is the writer's opinion that these personalities which respond to conflict find satisfaction in the political activities offered by the nudist camp and develop into the leaders needed on the area and national levels to turn nudist activity into a nudist movement.

NOTES

1. This paper is the result of an independent research project carried out by the writer and his wife from March to September, 1957. The writer is indebted to Dr. Robert F. Murphy of the University of California whose suggestions shaped the direction of the study but who should not be considered responsible for the form of the paper or the conclusions drawn. The writer is also indebted to the many nudists and nudist leaders, both local and national, whose open and friendly cooperation made it possible to investigate the subject.
2. On special days when nudists, in deference to the non-nudists present, don clothing.
3. This is not to imply that the nudists were wasting time or engaging in any self-deception. The issues were important to them, largely, the writer feels, because they were serving as channels for aggressive impulses.
4. The criteria for judging what is a proper or improper nude picture is more complicated within the nudist world than in the clothed world. It is hoped that it will be the subject of a further paper stemming from this study of the nudist movement.

