

Personality Difficulties of College Graduates¹

Suggestions Concerning Causes and Means of Eliminating Them

By SAMUEL S. BOARD

Director, Yale Graduate Placement Bureau, New York

IT IS with some diffidence that I approach the subject assigned to me this evening. The bureau of which I happen to have charge has been in operation only three years and there has not been sufficient time as yet to secure data to justify any sweeping conclusions. There are some impressions, however, gained through the intimate contacts of this period which may be of interest.

Before proceeding with these, I should like to give my definition of personality. Following somewhat closely on Webster's definition, though not quoting it verbatim, one might say that it is the sum total of those distinguishing characteristics of mind and body which differentiates one person from his fellows of the same general group. The definition of this group in some measure defines the qualities which are pertinent. If everyone were a college graduate from the same general environment there would be some characteristics which could not be considered a part of the individual's personality simply because they would be common to all. If, however, we included in the group a variety of people of the same race but of varying social and educational backgrounds these characteristics would stand out prominently as personality factors. Such group characteristics are likely to disappear through increased contact with non-college men or a varied environment. I think it is safe to say that the personality difficulties discoverable in men more than five years out of college do not differ greatly from those of non-college men. They may have the warpings of personality which come from extreme introversion, the feelings of defeat which tend toward a paranoiac condition and the lack of effectiveness which results so frequently from intimate contact with a dominant personality. These may be intensified by contrast with the dreams and aspirations which come during college days but otherwise

¹From a lecture given at the Town Hall Club, New York, April 16, 1929, as part of a symposium on "Personality," under the auspices of the Association for Personality Training.

they do not differ from the difficulties which are discoverable in other adults. When we consider the period covered by the first five years after college, however, we do have certain personality difficulties which are perhaps distinguishable as applying chiefly to college men. A discussion of these can best be approached through a review of the underlying and responsible conditions involved rather than through a detailed description of their manifestations. These are varied but quite easily recognizable by anyone familiar with the recent college graduate.

Certainly one of the underlying conditions is a mental instability. College work for most men is a broadening process. Whole new fields of knowledge have been presented for their consideration. There is the opportunity to take part in varied activities; the chance to engage in sports actively; to hear good music; to indulge in serious or flip-pant discussion and to engage in manifold social activities. As a result most college graduates seem to have a secret but sincere conviction that they can do almost anything which they really wish to set their hands to. Coupled with this is a feeling of dismay at their lack of real knowledge of the field of work into which most of them are being thrust. As a result they fail frequently properly to present their abilities and on the other hand are almost as frequently considered "high hat" and presumptuous by their employers and fellow workmen. Naturally this emotional seesawing produces a mental instability which is always unfortunate and usually makes the social side of adjustment to work difficult.

Contributing further to an attitude of reserve is the desire not to seem "collegiate." Among the graduates of Eastern colleges at least, the buffoonery which is so common in the movies of college life and which is the butt of so many jokes in comic magazines has resulted in the average college graduate's being extremely anxious not to appear obtrusive or different from the average well-bred

August, 1929

BULLETIN OF THE TAYLOR SOCIETY

181

person. He dislikes exceedingly, for instance, to talk about himself even when seeking a job. He does not unlimber with strangers at all. This quality almost seems related to the usual desire of brides and grooms not to be picked out as such. Even if they may desire passionately to be different they do not wish to appear so! And this additional diffidence is interpreted as "high-hat."

Another very widespread condition among recent graduates comes directly from attendance at college and is both a very common cause of changing jobs and a reason for moodiness. This is the failure to continue mental activity after leaving college. Most of us are familiar with the results among college athletes of neglecting their activities in later life. Lung cells and muscles which are not used deteriorate, are especially subject to disease and are sometimes the cause of early death. Somewhat the same thing happens on the mental side. Even the laziest of college students has a continuous procession of new problems presented to him for solution while in school. When he gets out into business, his jobs provide new problems for a few months and then becomes routine. Ordinarily a man would look around for new things to think about at that time, but frequently the college graduate expects either the job or someone in the company to do this for him. If it is not done he becomes restless, moody, and sick of his job and sometimes quits for no other reason. He just "does not like his work any more."

This is often aggravated by environment. Starting salaries do not provide for any of the luxuries of life in any event and may in addition have to be stretched to pay for college obligations or to help out at home. As a result men just out may be deprived of social contacts through clubs; they usually cannot afford the good music which they have been accustomed to hearing and may have no introduction to social circles in the strange city in which they start work. Such a condition helps to intensify the mental and social starvation which sets in due to lack of mental stimulus on the job.

This last condition seems a reflection on the university and the employer as well as on the man. If our universities are going to develop in men a taste for literature, for the solution of problems and for the appreciation of art, they ought also to teach their graduates the art of finding these privileges inexpensively after they get out. If a non-

college man wishes to be cultured he usually has to discover the sources of culture himself and in the ordinary environment. If the secret of learning is not to stuff one's head with a heterogeneous collection of facts but to discover the means of getting information when it is needed, education would seem to be deficient when the ability to do this in other environments is not developed also.

My feeling toward the employer's responsibility in the matter is less positive. He usually just does not understand. In years past, however, when business was done through smaller organizations, it was the gracious custom of many heads of businesses to introduce young employes, if they were at all acceptable, to social and business circles where they could find companionship without too much expense. Today management is so depersonalized that this "goes by the board." Frequently the employer lives in a suburban community whereas the young man may have to find a room in the city itself. As a result the beginner is likely to feel even more acutely that nobody is interested in him and to withdraw almost entirely into communion with himself or a small group of other men similarly situated. In many of the better shops employers take considerable pains to see that beginners are oriented properly within the shop. A little more effort spent in social orientation without might pay.

My own remedy for this difficulty is extremely simple but usually effective. I try to present the situation to the man as an opportunity to take the initiative and become socially independent. In the first place, this involves laying out a course of study for himself and approaching his thinking about his job from a new angle. Perhaps it may mean studying the difficulties and problems of his superiors and planning solutions which he would apply if he were in their place. Sometimes the most fertile field is that of the problems of his fellow workmen. Again it may be most profitable to study the industry as a whole; anything which will increase his knowledge of the business and allow him to develop along his own lines. The second step is to center his social attentions on studying the interests and activities of the new social groups with which he comes in contact. This again helps to take him out of himself and to broaden his social knowledge as well as to counteract abnormal tendencies toward introversion.