

Dr. Thomas Doyal  
John Dewey and “Social Control”

### Fitting In

Our old station wagon rattles over the bridge. There is a rhythm to the tires crossing the struts in the road . . . clank-clank . . . clank-clank . . . clank-clank. I only notice it because it struggles against the beat of the song on the radio.

All of this is lost because of the upcoming site. Across the bridge is a vast expanse of wilderness and just beyond, a sign of life. Not life I could touch, smell or see for that matter. Not life as in people moving about or the sounds of people laughing but a cluster of gray buildings in the distance.

“There it is our new home.” Excitement was in Dad’s voice. Mom didn’t speak. Our new home? Is it home? A home has memories, is a part of a community, (1) has neighbors, has history and is gladly a part of a group. As of now, we have none of these.

We move a lot. It’s not Dad’s fault. Each house seems to get bigger. I guess he’s successful. Please don’t tell anyone I said it . . .but I hope he’s not so successful this time.

We’re close now. Hey not all of the buildings are gray. The sign says “Welcome to Anytown, USA.” The next sign I see, “Good Citizens Wanted. Everyone Else Keep Driving.” (2)

“Hey dad, are we good citizens?”

“You bet son! We want to fit in and we will.” (3)

It’s the first day of school, for me that is. Everyone else has been in this class for months. Mrs. Rodriguez is the teacher of this 5<sup>th</sup> grade class. “Good morning Ronald, it is great to have you!”

You know what? Her smile, her eyes, both told me she was serious. There were only a few students there already. One by one students filled their desks. “Before we start today’s activities, let me introduce Ronald.” A chorus of “hello Ronald” pelted me.

“Ronald, everyone in the class is paired up with a buddy. We’ve had an odd number of students until you joined us. Now Frederick has a partner. Ronald and Frederick make up our newest team. Frederick, come shake the hand of your new partner, Ronald.”

Frederick stuck out his hand. I reached to shake with my new partner. At the last moment he yanked his hand back to run his fingers through his hair. Everyone laughed. I didn’t know what to do so I ran my fingers through my hair. You see, I just wanted to fit in. (4) I want so much to be part of the group. (5)

Lunch time! We're all in a line. I'm with my partner. Frederick says "Look at that loser Arnold."

"What's wrong with Arnold?" I asked.

"Look at those old shoes. Those pants don't even fit. I hear his mom is a maid. She cleans peoples' houses. I've got an idea. Let's go mess with him."

We work our way through the line. It seems no one else likes Arnold. He is sitting by himself. Frederick heads right for Arnold. I sit down across from the two of them.

"Hey Arnold, did you meet the new kid, Ronald?" Frederick asks. "Hey Ronald, shake Arnold's hand."

Arnold reluctantly reaches out his hand. The moment of truth. Should I grasp his hand in friendship or should I do what I know my partner wants me to do? Will I embarrass Arnold like Frederick did to me? I just want to fit in. (6) My hand goes out. I feel it start to pull back. As I realize what I am doing is wrong, I reach out again but it's too late. Arnold's hand is withdrawn.

Frederick starts to laugh out loud. All the other kids turn to see what's going on. Arnold looked humiliated. I try to tell Arnold that I'm sorry but his eyes were filling with tears of humiliation. I'll never forget the sadness in his eyes.

We're back in class now. Mrs. Rodriguez asks our "work collector" to collect the essays we have been working on. (7) She then instructs us to go to our "centers" with our partners. (8) Each center offers a selection of academic games.

My partner Frederick grabs the chess set. "Do you know how to play?" he asks.

"Sure, let's play."

"We sure stuck it to Arnold didn't we?"

"I feel pretty bad about that."

"Don't be ridiculous! C'mon, let's play chess" demanded Frederick. "I'm white" he said as he grabbed the white queen.

We set up the pieces. I love chess. Maybe it's because I'm good at it. I sure can't throw a football.

The challenge of chess is knowing the rules and how all the pieces move. Speaking of that, we start playing and right away Frederick insisted his bishop could jump a pawn. He wasn't playing by the rules. (9) This wasn't chess. By changing the rules, he was changing the game to something other than chess. (10)

"Frederick, why do you always want to go against the group?" (11)

"Because no one is going to control me," (12) he said with a devilish smirk.

"Class, we need to cut centers short. Everyone back to your seat," ordered Mrs. Rodriguez.

Frederick instantly started putting away the chess set.

“I thought you would not be controlled,” I said.

“She is different,” replied Fredrick.

“How so?”

“She is always fair. She never bosses us around just to be bossy. She only asks us to do what is necessary.” (13)

Wow! What a first day! The bell rings for dismissal. I jumped up to leave. Why am I the only one out of my seat.? Everyone else is sitting quietly. I’m not sure why, but it occurs to me that to be on the same page with the rest of the group, I should sit down.

(14) Mrs. Rodriquez waits patiently until I sit down.

“Row three, you are dismissed. Row two . . .” (15) That’s me. As I reach the door, so does Arnold. In an attempt to show my remorse for lunch time, I stick out my hand. He stops. With a surprised look he hesitates but then sticks out his hand. As I reach for it, he pulls it back and runs his fingers through his hair. Arnold grins at me. This time his eyes have no tears, they have a bit of a twinkle. “Welcome to the group,” laughed Arnold.

## Big Idea – “Social Control”

The following quotes illuminate Dewey’s ideas on social control. The numbers imbedded in the story are tied to a thought, action or circumstance the ‘characters’ are experiencing.

Can you correlate the thought or ‘action’ in the story to one or more of the following ideas? Try to determine which of Dewey’s ideas are illustrated by the numbered passages in the story.

- A. “I take it that no one would deny that the ordinary good citizen is a matter of fact subject to a great deal of social control and that a considerable part of this control is not felt to involve restriction of personal freedom.” (p52)
- B. “Children at recess or after school play games, from tag to one-old-cat to baseball and football. The games involve rules, and these rules order their conduct. The games do not go on haphazardly or by succession of improvisations. Without rules there is no game.” (p52)
- C. “No rules then no game; different rules, then a different game.” (p52)
- D. “Now, the general conclusion I would draw is that control of individual actions is effected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved, in which they are co-operative or interacting parts.” (p53)
- E. “Stated the other way around, those who take part do not feel that they are bossed by an individual person or are being subjected to the will of some outside superior person.” (p53)
- F. In all such cases, it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are part of a community, not outside of it. (p54)
- G. “I do not mean that there are no occasions upon which the authority of, say, the parent does not have to intervene and exercise fairly direct control.” (p54)
- H. And what is even more important, the authority in question when exercised in a well-regulated household or other community group is not a manifestation of merely personal will; the parent or teacher exercises it as the representative and agent of the interest of the group as a whole.” (p54)

- I. “The teacher reduces to a minimum the occasions in which he or she has to exercise power in a personal way. When it is necessary, in the second place, to speak and act firmly, it is done on behalf of the interest of the group, not as an exhibition of personal power.” (p54)
- J. “A genuine community life has its ground in natural sociability. But community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously.” (p56)
- K. The counterpart of this factor in school life is found in the question of manners, especially good manners in the manifestations of politeness and courtesy.” (p59)