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**THE PSYCHOSOCIAL COSTS  
OF POLICE CORRUPTION**

Charles Bahn

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# THE PSYCHOSOCIAL COSTS OF POLICE CORRUPTION

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In this age of psychology, one idea that was widely accepted was that personality and character are formed during the early years of childhood and that what happens after that simply relates to the ways in which basic personality are expressed. Thus, the claim of religious educators was "give me a child up to the age of seven and after that he's mine for life." We have all learned that most people show a basic temperament and a basic direction of personality in early childhood. Although we acknowledge the influence of heredity in the concept of the good or the bad seed and we recognize that physical traits play a part in the development of the individual, we believe that the basic patterns that a person will show develop early in life.

Because socialization, the process by which a person learns to perform his various social roles, really involves learning the underlying rules of social life, it is also believed that socialization takes place primarily, if not exclusively, in childhood and during adolescence. The study of the processes of socialization put the greatest concentration on the family situation and on the schools as the settings in which social behavior is learned.

However, we now see there is more involved than simply learning social rules. The fitting together of the individual and his social setting is a continuous process and therefore must cover the life span. Whenever two people interact in a relationship with any emotional involvement, at any stage in life, they are shaping each other's activities, values and behavior patterns. Adult personality and behavior is not fixed, but combines both stability and change.

During the adult years, two major kinds of social learning take place. The first, anticipatory socialization, is the process of preparation for a change in role or status. The medical student in his third year of study begins to constantly wear his white lab coat and is called "doctor" even before he has his M.D. Men in their late 50's begin exploring new interests or activities in preparation for the time when they will retire from their jobs.

The second kind occurs after a new role or status actually begins and a process of resocialization or of reorganizing one's expectations must take place. The physician must cope with his inevitable errors; the retired person finds that fishing is not as fascinating as it seemed to be.

Police agencies have to give a great deal of attention to both anticipatory socialization and resocialization. Even during his first week on the beat, a police officer must perform like a veteran. Academy training has this as its primary focus. The acid test of this proposition comes when, during the times of budget crisis, training must be cut back to its barest elements. At these times, it often seems as if the agency will settle for a police officer who just looks the part. Training in law and police practice may become rudimentary but meticulous attention is still given to posture, the right way to wear the uniform and police protocol.

Students of the police such as Niederhoffer, Wilson, Westley, Balch, Banton, and Saunders have all traced the process of socialization to the police role. Social roles differ widely in the extent to which they make demands on the individual. Some roles are transitory and make few demands. To be a member of the audience at a concert, all that you have to do is sit quietly and applaud at the right times. Generally, occupational roles are more demanding and in some cases, they permeate and even overshadow all other roles in the individual's life. These are dominant roles in the exact meaning of the word, that they dominate and therefore control the shape of other roles. Borrowing from Goffman's concept of "total institutions," we can call these "total roles." In our society they are often tied to the professions, such as the roles of physician and clergyman. The police officer's role is exactly that: a total role.

The point is that the way in which someone acts in his role as husband, father, neighbor, friend or associate is shaped by the fact that he is a police officer. Whether he is on the job, relaxing with his family, away on vacation, or commuting, the demands of occupation-related performance are actual or

potential. For the police officer, his total role is also defined in terms of his legal obligations. He is required to respond to emergency situations as a police officer at all times within his agency's jurisdiction, and in this sense, is on duty 24 hours a day.

The demands of the total role are, of course, an ideal. Just as the individual physician has the choice of identifying himself as a doctor while on duty or on vacation, or not doing so, the police officer, sometimes, has the same choice.

This gap between ideal and real is even more relevant to how he performs than whether he does so. The ideal role of the policeman demands qualities of judgement, forbearance, patience, courage, stamina, and integrity that are beyond the capacity of most individual police officers to show at all times. The gap between ideal and real is further widened by the fact that many agencies make demands on their officers that are either barely realizable, or just plain unrealizable. In the manual of practices of almost every police department, there are some rules or regulations that deviate so far from reality that no single officer ever fulfills them. This is no small problem. On the one hand, a code or manual should represent a standard to aspire to, a model to reach for. On the other, the more obvious the gap between the "book" and the "world," the less seriously people take the admonitions of the book. Rules come to be regarded as pious pronouncements; standards are seen as public relations ploys.

This gap is one of the constantly stressful conflicts within the police role, and conflicts within the police role are particularly intense since it is a total role with enormous emotional investment. Much of this investment is positive in the sense that it comes from strong motivation to be of service, to help people in the community. Some of it derives from the enormous social costs of the police identity. Taking on the total role means moving toward a kind of social isolation in which the person is partially cut off from family, friends and neighbors. People in general become guarded with police officers,

and officers learn to be close mouthed about their work and their feelings about it. This, in turn, forces the individual to develop co-workers within the Department as social referents and to confine fully developed relationships to the intimacy of marriage and to partnerships on the job.

What is involved in being a police officer? Is it just a job with tightly defined rules and procedures or is it more than that — a way of life, a vocation that shapes those who enter into it?

Although the evidence is somewhat flawed by the relatively poor design of many of the studies on the subject, the weight of evidence as reviewed by Lefkowitz (1975) is that there is a modal police personality. The studies seem to tell us that police officers are, in some ways, distinctive.

There are several possible determinants of these differences, all of which may contribute to them in part. To begin with police candidates are separated from the population at large by age, height, and other qualifications. Even to become a police candidate, demands a particular constellation of motivations and interests. The candidate goes through physical and medical tests, laborious credential checks and screenings, and sometimes an extended delay before appointment. During the first two years of police work there is a relatively high rate of attrition, and those who find they have made a poor choice leave the job.

Given this process, we can conclude that policemen are made and not born. In the same way, corrupt policemen are made and not born that way. It is useless to talk about genetic defect, inadequate early training or to believe that a substantial number of corrupt police officers are morally defective young people who came into their Departments in order to take advantage of the illegitimate possibilities of the police role. There are such people, but they are rare exceptions.

It is more fruitful to concentrate on an adult resocialization process that is as potent in its own way as the early socialization of childhood in that it creates a new body of social

**rules and expectations.**

Right after the academy, when resocialization begins in earnest, it even displaces the tentatively held beliefs of anticipatory socialization. All during the academy, recruits imagine what it will be like to be police officers. The test of their notions comes when they are assigned to duty with an experienced officer. It is the veteran and his associates who are the judges of whether the newcomers have truly learned how police officers act and how they see the world. In technical terms they are the agents of resocialization.

In countless descriptions written by police officers about their first months on the job, there is stress on the overwhelming dependence on experienced officers, both for reasons of personal safety and for acceptance. If socialization to corruption will take place, it usually begins right at this point. New officers are taught that formal rules do not apply, that certain favors, gratuities and even breaches are acceptable, and that an officer who "belongs" never says anything about a fellow officer that could cause trouble.

Since we are discussing adults, it seems far-fetched to portray this process as the temptation of the innocent. We might ask whether a thinking adult should not be expected to apply his own standards to any situation. This view would fail to take into account how deep, all encompassing and disorienting, resocialization can be. As we begin to admit the possibility of "brainwashing," we also begin to ask whether there aren't less coercive value modifications that are caused by such forces as social isolation, limited cues, a new social context and the breakdown of familiar roles.

The social psychologist Edward E. Jones has analyzed the dilemma faced by any dependent person in trying to ingratiate himself with others. While dependence increases the motivation to make oneself attractive, the public knowledge of this dependence makes it more difficult to gain favor through such simple strategies as effusive compliments or little favors. In order to be successful the ingratiator has to be subtle. One

obvious way to be subtle is to give the impression of agreeing in a discerning and critical way. The young police officer, dependent and eager to be accepted, tends to move into precisely this pattern of behavior, convincing himself as well as others that he has reached considered agreement with the values expressed by the senior officers.

The essential point is that the individual is eager to accept new definitions and standards of behavior in accordance with a new value system. Everything in the situation conspires to make the new police officer especially vulnerable at this point in his career.

There is a second point of vulnerability that occurs in police careers. It takes place after the officer has been active for a long enough period of time to be aware of the limits of his capacity to make any basic changes in the world around him. People that he arrests right in the middle of the commission of a crime will reappear on the streets after an interval. Long periods of investigation and court appearances are made useless because of a technical flaw in an Assistant District Attorney's paper work or in a court clerk's filing of records.

The excitement and novelty of police work, seen by the new officer as an ever changing pattern of activity, full of shifts and surprises, wears off. The officer becomes aware that only a small proportion of calls that come in relate to challenging matters of crime. The struggle now becomes one of dealing with boredom and tedium. A code of silence imposed by the agency and by peers makes it impossible for the officer to discuss the pressures of predictability and boredom. As a result, this pressure festers within the officer, motivating the ambitious to dream of escaping by getting ahead and causing the indolent to compulsively review pension plans and retirement opportunities.

Just at this time, some criminals, particularly those engaged in victimless crimes, seem to the officer to be leading lives of excitement, gratification, and enormous non-taxable gain. While the officer recognizes that other criminals are desperate,

unbalanced individuals with whom it is difficult to empathize, some of those whom he encounters appear devastatingly sane and acting in intelligent self-interest. Some of them may even taunt him in this way.

This usually occurs about the time when the police officer's young family has been completed and children begin growing up. The stability in the family lives of police officers also means stable responsibilities and recurrent obligations with the anticipation of increasing financial burdens related to a desire to upgrade the family standard of living. To the family as well, particularly spouses, much of the police work is now routine, less of it is therefore shared. The divorce rate among fellow officers tends to rise about this point in his career as the stresses of rotating shifts, secrecy and excessive privacy, the constant lurking fear of injury or death and the competitive intimacy of on-the-job relationships, all contribute to the stresses of marriage.

It is at this second stage of vulnerability that some of the most effective police officers go bad. The very knowledge and sophistication that they have learned in their years of police work as well as the position and trust that they have attained can now be converted to the pursuit of personal gain.

The psychological basis of this second crisis has been well defined in terms of what Douglas Kimmel calls the career clock. This "clock" is similar to the "social clock;" it is the individual's subjective sense of being "on time" or "lagging behind" in his career development. The police officer, in his middle years becomes aware of the number of years left before retirement and the speed with which he is attaining his own goals. If he feels that he is lagging behind badly or if his goals now seem unrealistic, he may begin to adjust both his goals and his values.

It is no coincidence that suicide rates for white males in our society rise sharply between the ages of 34 and 55. Just as this middle years crisis can lead to emotional upheaval, it can lead to a shift in individual standards.

Despite this twin crisis of resocialization that occurs in police careers, socialization by itself does not make anyone corrupt. Socialization can only produce a police officer who is susceptible to corruptive influences. There will be enormous individual variation in the extent of susceptibility based on such factors as strength of the individual's personal structure of values, the kind of reinforcement available for these standards, and the availability of a supportive intimate with whom the police officer can discuss his conflicts. The context around him will also influence the officer. If every other City agency is corrupt, even the most ethical of police officers will be pushed toward susceptibility. There have been cases in American history when the less susceptible were slowly forced out of the police agency in order to ensure a viable conspiracy of corruption.

In recent years there has been increased attention placed on the concept of life stresses, events in the individual's life that traumatically assault his selfhood. While some of these are job related, others are personal and unpredictable. They, too, leave the individual shaken, unsure of his standards and vulnerable to pernicious influence. On a list of such stresses created by Dr. Thomas Holmes at the University of Washington, the three most stressful events are the death of one's spouse, divorce or marital separation. Also on the list are such matters as change in health of a family member, a new pregnancy, change to a different kind of work, wife beginning or stopping work, or taking on a new mortgage.

The persistence, skill and persuasiveness of the corruptor must not be forgotten. There are individuals with a sufficient touch of psychopathy to enable them to sense the areas of weakness of an individual and play upon them. To the extent that none of us are free from doubt or stress, every officer has points of potential vulnerability. The wily corruptor may be adept at locating these and exploiting them.

Having traced the path of socialization to corruption there are some clear implications about socializing an anti-corruption

climate. The first is that we must identify the strengths within individual officers and continue to reinforce them. There is no single area that is more significant than academy training and early field experience. During resocialization that takes place at this time, the genuine operational values of police work will be incorporated within the individual. The standards of the academy must relate to the real world. Hand picked senior officers should be assigned the task of working with recruits to show them "the ropes," and inculcate values.

Police officers should also have institutional support in dealing with life crises that occur during the later crisis period in their careers, when they are older and apparently more self-sufficient. There is a tendency to neglect them at this time for they have learned to wear the veneer of insensitivity and sophistication. We also feel that they deserve the small comfort that privacy affords in dealing with their personal problems. Paradoxically, help is most needed when it seems to be little needed.

We must also realize that corruption, like any other pathology, does not stem from a single source but represents a range of factors within the individual, within the group, and within society. Our attempt to create a climate that fosters integrity rather than corruption must nevertheless be unceasing for the psychosocial costs of corruption are extremely high.

### **The Psychosocial Costs of Police Corruption**

The public response to reports of police corruption is usually intense, avid and pained. The corruption is portrayed as a shocking betrayal and its details are reviewed with meticulous attention.

This reaction is dismaying to the police for it seems unfair. While the rules of public morality are stated as general, they appear to be applied to the police with special rigor. A public that seems well able to explain or rationalize minor breaches of its rules when they are committed by citizens, responds to police misdeeds with cries of pain and shock.

To the police, these cries appear, at best, to be hypocritical;

at worst, they engender feelings of persecution.

It is particularly distressing to police that the fact of police corruption and not its amount or magnitude causes the sharp public reaction. There seems to be little interest in rational inquiry into the damage actually done. The report of a bribe dwells on the amount received more than on the value of the services given in return. The public reaction appears disproportionate to the actual breach.

This feeling is enhanced, of course, because as Herman Goldstein points out, the police officer knows a good deal about the corruption of others. He learns how people exploit each other and where corruption exists in the community. "It understandably angers him to know that institutions and professions which enjoy more prestige and status than his are as corrupt, if not more corrupt, but that the police are more commonly singled out for attention." We might add that police misdeeds are more quickly condemned without reasoned evaluation.

Police also sense a curious undertone of feeling in the public response to reported police corruption. Beneath the pain and shock, there is an avid curiosity, a concentrated attention to detail that somehow doesn't square with expressions of disgust and hurt. The public seems to be reacting to more than the actual incident; the betrayal that is alleged seems to go beyond the specific misdeed.

In sensing that something deeper is involved, the police are right, for the costs of police corruption go beyond the dollar cost, the loss in efficiency, the misspent public funds, even malfeasance itself. Police corruption occasions shock, causes pain, and is picked over like a scab because it hurts at a very deep level.

Its psychosocial costs include an assault on the basic disposition to trust, the compromising of a role model significant in the development of prosocial values, and incipient social disorganization.

## **Trust**

Erik Erikson, in describing the development of human personality, introduces trust as a quality attained early in life. He is not talking about gullibility, but about a basic belief that the world is orderly, predictable, relatively stable and dependable. The child with this basic stance toward the world, toward nature, things and even people, has an emotional basis for action, movement, experimentation and risk-taking.

The specifics of trust, who you trust and who can be trusted, become modified as the individual goes through adult life, shaped by specific experiences. The basic stand, however, remains present, in Erikson's view, although modified by adult, rational discretion. Where there is no contrary evidence, some people begin all transactions from an inclination to trust.

Erikson sees trust as a basic stage, and its absence is extremely serious. Trust is the ground work of hope, for one thing. It also helps the individual to recover from injury or hurt, because it makes it possible to believe that the usual order of the world is not capricious or suddenly injurious.

Most people are trustful, in this sense, although realistic dangers and deceptions from the world around us tend to direct trust toward those we love and toward those to whom we have granted authority.

The residual trust that was once vested in our parents becomes vested in the authority figures of our society, whose function and charge it is to maintain order, stability, and equity in the social and political world.

The desire to trust in benign and just authority is especially strong and even almost desperate in our time, for we have seen an increasing tendency for people to feel powerless in our society. People feel less able to control their destinies, unable to influence the major events that will shape and change their lives.

There are many reasons for this growing feeling of powerlessness, including threats of nuclear war, population pressures,

ever more complex technology, the growth of automation, and international economic fluctuation. From a more personal perspective, powerlessness is said to stem from what is called the "vacant family," in which parents have an increasingly limited responsibility and capacity to give their loved ones care, comfort, wisdom, and protection. In the face of danger and threat, both international and local, the family huddles together, unable to defend itself. Adults in this situation lose pride; children lose confidence both in their own capacities and in those of their parents.

Police agencies, like other governmental agencies, are established in order to help people retain some legitimate control of the world around them. If the individual citizen can't redress grievances done to him, the officers of the law can do so. Though fathers as well as sons may not be able to protect themselves against the sneakthief, the mugger, the beserk attacker, or the predator, they can retain some control by calling the police, even if only after a loss or attack. They can, at least, have the crime reported and recorded. They can feel that someone with power and legal authority is looking for the attacker in order to bring him to justice and possible punishment. In the sense that most citizens are relatively helpless against most criminals, the police protect the helpless.

The trust vested in the police goes far beyond this need for response and redress. No matter how powerful, how well armed, how ingenious anyone may be, there are times when every person is helpless. If we should be involved in an accident, faint suddenly while walking on the street, or in some other way temporarily lose control, we place our trust in the police to help us and protect us at that time. The police legitimately may approach the individual prone on the street, open a door to find out why the occupant of an apartment or room does not respond to calls, or untangle the accident victim from the wreckage.

When the police deal with people who are temporarily ill, unconscious, or overcome, everything is entrusted to them.

Not merely appropriate treatment or calling for the right kind of assistance, but also safeguarding and protecting the individual and his property. The police can open a purse to find identification and go through a wallet, looking for a driver's license.

If the police are venal or corrupt, then we are all vulnerable to their rapacity. We are so much more helpless, so truly powerless that it is deeply frightening. Even those with a basic sense of trust, are badly shaken when their appointed protectors seem to become their predators.

### **Police as Role Models**

Boy Scouts are the symbols of probity among boys: police officers among men and women.

They are pointed out to children as the embodiment of civic and personal virtues. Most adults, too, are willing to believe that police officers have common sense, courage, commitment and strength to spare.

For children, particularly, this symbolism is important. Piaget and Bruner have demonstrated that children gain a grasp of abstract concepts by first investing these qualities in concrete individuals and objects. (The appeal of comic strip characters often lies in their expression of absolute values and qualities). The image of the strong, fair, vigilant, and powerful police officer helps youngsters to learn to appreciate qualities of strength and purpose.

For this reason, young boys often identify very closely with police after they have passed through the "cowboy" phase of expressing their "fast on the trigger" response and their daring, and they move on to identification with the power, the purpose, and control of police. Admittedly, this identification with the police is only readily apparent when there are beneficent police officers on hand to identify with. In ghetto communities, where the police officer is seen as antagonist, this identification does not as readily take place. Yet, most children watch television shows about the police, and identify

with police officers as heroes.

With adolescence, this identification takes on tinges of suspicion and doubt that reflect concerns close to home as well as doubts about the police. It is a time of trial and testing, both of the self and the world around. Parents, and other adults, once regarded as possessed only of wisdom and virtue, are now experienced as flawed. The adolescent wonders whether anyone is really any better, whether reputations and public images are not all false.

When youngsters and young adults hear of immorality among the clergy or dishonesty among the police, this contributes to a cynical, deprecating viewpoint that identifies morality and probity as "kid stuff" to be discarded as you grow up.

This developmental problem is even more acute when personal access to adult role models is restricted because of broken homes, desertion, or fragmented life styles. In this case, the juvenile is dependent on the images projected by secondary sources such as movies or television. When the gap between these images and real behavior is revealed, then conventional values are quickly discarded.

It is instructive that in studying police encounters with juveniles, the possible confounding effects of corruption were implicitly taken into account. Piliavin and Briar in their classic article on this subject (1964) take pains to point out that they studied a department which "was noted within the community it served and among law enforcement officers elsewhere for the honesty and superior quality of its personnel." They acknowledge that where corruption exists, encounters of police and juveniles must be presumed to have been adversely affected.

It has been demonstrated that such prosocial actions as giving help, charity and comfort, for example, have been related to the behavior of models (Bryan and Test, 1967; Rosen and White, 1967; Hornstein, Fisch and Holmes, 1968).

When a role model is compromised, the character elements

that it exemplified become weakened in society, for they are harder to learn and much harder to believe in.

### **Incipient Social Disorganization**

Police corruption can produce social disorganization because of the negative effects it has on police performance. Herman Goldstein sums it up with an observation from a Life Magazine study that "you can't expect cops on the take to take orders." While this appears to be a flip observation it contains a valid statement that has a documented psychological basis. There is reason to believe that corrupt policemen will be unable to do their job properly or carry out orders effectively.

The proof of this is found in an experiment performed by Carlsmith and Gross in 1969. The situation was set up as a learning experiment in which the real subjects were given the role of "teacher," and they punished the "learner" confederate whenever an error was made. Some subjects punished by delivering loud buzzes, but others delivered electric shock.

After the "learning" experiment was over, the confederate made requests for time-consuming favors from both the control subjects and the shock delivering "transgressor" subjects.

We call the people who delivered shock "transgressor" because, despite the fact that they were following orders, they were doing something that they knew was generally considered wrong.

While only one quarter of the subjects who had delivered buzzes agreed to the confederate's request, three quarters of those who had delivered shock agreed to help. Getting one person to deliver shock to another produces three times as much compliance to the other's request for help as getting him to deliver buzzes, a more acceptable penalty.

In another phase of the study, a third person, also posing as a subject, watched the real subject deliver shock and then made a request. Surprisingly, there was even more compliance to the observer's request than when the actual recipient of the

shock made the request.

This experiment is part of a group of experiments (Berscheid, E., & Walster, E., 1967; Freedman, Wallington & Bless, 1967; Wallace & Sapalla, 1966; Carlsmann, J.M.; Elsworth, P.G., & Whiteside, J., 1968), in which the "transgressions" ranged from delivering a shock, telling a lie, upsetting some stacked cards, breaking a machine, taking money from someone and cheating on an exam. In all of the cases, transgression leads to greater compliance.

In all the experiments, there is only one case that emerges as an exception. When the subjects know that they may be hurt in return or may be held accountable, they show less tendency to compensate the victim by complying with later requests.

Let us consider the implications of these experiments in trying to determine the effects of corruption on general police performance. Corrupt police know that they are violating accepted standards of society. Like the experimental subjects delivering shock, they have excuses for what they are doing but know that it is regarded as wrong. It seems reasonable to assume that, like the experimental subjects, they are also subject to the later tendency to comply with requests. That is, corrupt police would be more inclined to make exceptions, be lax in their performance or job duties and less dedicated to the job on the whole than other police. It would not involve a voluntary decision nor is it necessarily something that the individual is aware of. What the research demonstrates is that the individual who has "transgressed" is simply more likely to accommodate to later requests, sometimes after really being undecided.

There are several more obvious ways in which corruption tends for a negative effect on performance. One is that both the corrupt activities themselves and their concealment takes time, ingenuity, and effort during working hours. Another is that the perception of laxity and corruption on the force causes citizens to be scornful of police and less cooperative. Finally, distinctions between clean and dirty money, permissible and

taboo areas of corruption, and other such distinctions tend to blur over time.

The reaction of the public to police corruption is emotional, but it expresses a valid emotion. The psychosocial costs of corruption are enormous, for corruption undermines trust, compromises the significant role model and damages the level of police performance. Anyone who has seen the childlike trust with which people place themselves in the hands of the police during a catastrophe, or after an accident can readily understand how important it is for all of us to be able to feel that our police are strong and incorruptable.

Let us abandon simplistic theories that tell us that corruption is an individual deviation rather than a social problem. We must plan a process of socialization into the police role that guards against corruption and corruptive influences. We must provide support to our police officers particularly during the crisis periods in their careers. Our responsibility goes beyond that of providing effective police service, for the psychosocial effects of corruption are felt throughout society.

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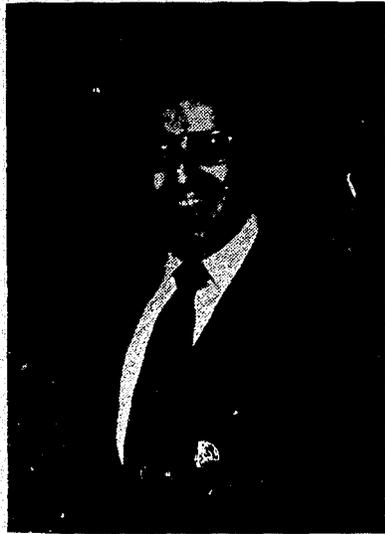
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