

FACULTY

Cookie-cutter character

Research questions morals education *By Lawrence Mober*

You don't suppose that Ronald McDonald is actually a subversive, bending the morals of American youth? Maybe not, but he does represent a process sociologists call "McDonaldization," our tendency to want things done efficiently and with clearly measurable results. It gives you exactly what you ordered from the menu—every time.

The reality is that McDonaldization has greatly influenced our culture, including the way we educate our children about character and morals. The federal initiative, No Child Left Behind, offers grant funding to schools for character building programs with the caveat that participating schools scientifically measure character development as it unfolds in the curriculum.

Suzanne Hudd, associate professor of sociology, is concerned that the intrusion of McDonaldization into the education mainstream may end up being counterproductive. She is the author of "Mc-Morals Revisited: Creating Irrational Characters," a chapter in *McDonaldization: The Reader*, an anthology edited by groundbreaking sociologist George Ritzer. She speculates that "McDonaldized" character education actually may reduce the ability of students to make independent moral decisions.

In her chapter, Hudd coins the term "McMorals" to describe a pervasive mindset based on the principles of McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Education is not exempt. "Our approach to teaching character is being driv-

en by our deeply embedded drive for efficient and predictable outcomes," she says. It all fits with the outcome-oriented goals of No Child Left Behind.

The principles of McDonaldization may have a place in a society of robots or sheep, but there is no guarantee they will foster the development of strong, independent character. "There is a risk that character education, if not implemented well, simply may serve as a vehicle for control," she says.

Ironically, character lessons that emphasize "efficient" instruction of specific values rather than reflecting on moral dilemmas may deprive children of important lessons about morality that occur when they are empowered to make open-ended moral decisions and to learn from the choices they make. And these are often the most important lessons of all.

Hudd is wary about this apparent push for conformity beginning at an early age. "In a homogenized curriculum, the complexity of character may be lost as discussion is contained around a limited set of attributes... Much as McDonald's offers three flavors of milkshakes, many character education programs espouse a limited set of principles to achieve predetermined outcomes," she writes.

With its single-minded insistence on results tied to character instruction, the federal government has missed the point, Hudd says. Schools that teach character educa-

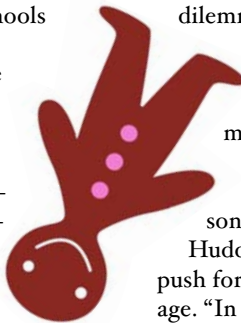
tion often use statistics, such as declining rates of vandalism or theft during school hours, to demonstrate their success, and then fail to consider whether there has been a fundamental change in attitude, character or moral thinking.

"In the worst case, the numbers may only indicate that students are better at hiding or postponing their misdeeds," she notes.

Hudd says ethical decisions do not come in tidy packages. "There is often more than one good way to resolve a moral dilemma," she points out, "and in my research, it has been interesting to observe unelicited creativity and compassion among students. The 'magic' of character stems from the surprises and unique opportunities it offers us." When character education is offered with an eye only to efficiency, Hudd says it can "create a single lens through which teachers and students interpret their character experiences."

Educators disagree on what character is, what constitutes character education and how to best provide it, Hudd observes. She also wonders if children may experience their "character lessons" in ways the designers didn't intend. In her current research, she is interviewing young children to learn what they think about character education and how it has affected their thinking and interactions with peers.

As both a scholar and mother of two daughters, Hudd is a little worried. She writes, "The world in which our children must act—the world beyond school walls—is characterized by moral ambiguity. By their nature, McDonaldized systems minimize choice. As character education is shifted from something that happens informally in classroom discussion to a federally funded agenda item, the complexity of character development may be lost."





Eric Bronson, assistant professor of sociology, and Brandy Lombardi '08.

STUDENTS

Criminal Minds

Senior examines research on prison subcultures *By Helen Martin*

Examining transcripts of interviews conducted with prison inmates may not sound like everyone's favorite leisure activity, but for Brandy Lombardi '08, it was fascinating.

Lombardi jumped at the chance to help Eric Bronson, assistant professor of sociology, with his research into subcultures among prisoners at medium security prisons this past summer. She was looking to collaborate on a research project, and when she learned that Bronson needed an assistant, she applied for a Quinnipiac interdisciplinary research grant. Quinnipiac awarded Lombardi \$4,000. She is the first student from the Department of Criminal Justice to receive such a grant.

Bronson became interested in prison subcultures when he worked at a Kentucky prison. He noticed that the inmates there constructed a social structure based upon

how much status each prisoner had. A prisoner's status was determined by such factors as the crimes they'd committed, the prestige

they had in the prison, and whether they had access to contraband, such as weapons, drugs, alcohol and other items not permitted inside prison walls.

Bronson found that no real research existed on prison subcultures, so he took it upon himself to begin the work. He spoke with prisoners in medium security prisons in Ohio and Texas. (He requested permission to interview Connecticut prisoners, but was refused access by the state.) Asking broad questions like, "Tell me about your day," he would get

the prisoners to open up about their lives, and gain valuable insight into a way of life most of us know nothing about.

"The prisoners were happy to talk to anyone new," Bronson said. "After three or four years, family members and friends stop visiting, and letters and phone calls also decrease, so the inmates told me things they wouldn't have shared with loved ones. And in Texas I was in an air-conditioned room, so they were happy to talk for a long time!"

Bronson gave Lombardi transcriptions of the 50 interviews, each lasting around two hours, for analysis. "I was looking for themes, any similarities in what they were saying that would indicate a subculture," she said. "Prisoners have a language, they use different words for things—they say 'chow' for food or 'hootch' for alcohol." Lombardi also noticed that various groups within the prisons used a different "lingo" to define their identities.

Lombardi had developed her own interest in prison culture before she started on the project for Bronson. She also had a preconceived idea of what she would find when reading each of the interviews. She was surprised, however, by some of the information contained in the transcriptions, and made some interesting observations. "I found out that murderers can make the best prisoners," she said. "They tend to just do it once, as a crime of passion, then not cause any trouble again."

Lombardi hopes to present her research paper at a sociology conference, and she and

"I found out that murderers can make the best prisoners." —BRANDY LOMBARDI '08

Bronson would like to publish it. "It would be great for Brandy to have her name on a published piece of research," Bronson said.

After she graduates in May, Lombardi plans to continue her studies at graduate school, and would like to continue her sociological research. She plans further research concerning prison gang activity, which she says is difficult to eradicate in part because many inmates are able to maintain contact with gang members on the streets.