

January 1950

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Recommended Citation

Robert B. Parks, A Psycho-Social Approach, 27 *Dicta* 242 (1950).

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A Psycho-Social Approach

Broken homes are the result of the emotional disturbances of the family, and delinquency is often a result of the disturbances, rather than of the actual break.²⁴ The severance of the husband-wife relationship is not nearly as important a factor as the child's reaction to it, and to the conflict which has gone before. After all, family disorganization is usually a gradual process. It is often the emotional tension preceding the divorce, or the apparent necessity of siding with one parent which causes damage to the child's personality. Possibly, a quick divorce would save more children from delinquent lives than continual endurance of an impossible marriage relationship with its attendant emotional strain. Often a child's adjustment has been improved by desertion, divorce, or the death of one parent. The physically broken home is important primarily because it offers *fertile soil* for the development of conflict, and because it fails to give needed aid in personal development.²⁵

The same may be said of the broken home as of the other factors which are known to contribute to the causes of delinquency. As one writer has expressed it,

It is now generally agreed that the search for one cause or for many separate causes of problem behavior in children is futile, since behavior in any individual, whether conforming or creative or non-conforming, appears to be one aspect of a continuous, dynamic interplay between individual and environment.²⁶

A PSYCHO-SOCIAL APPROACH

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Two general approaches may be taken to the problem of juvenile delinquency, interrelated and difficult in practice to distinguish: (1) that related to the mores of our culture with primary emphasis on socio-legal aspects, and (2) that related to the individual delinquent himself with primary emphasis upon the adjustmental patterns of his behavior. In this discussion, the first will be indirectly considered with the latter receiving focal attention.¹

Following this division of approach, and in preface to the following discussion, it is necessary to propose, provisionally, functional criteria for the designation of behavior as delinquent. When

²⁴ BARNES and TEETERS, *op. cit. supra* note 4 at 200.

²⁵ CAVAN, *op. cit. supra* note 15 at 110.

²⁶ Nicholson, *Juvenile Behavior Problems*, 1949 *Social Work Year Book* 277.

¹ In the present publication this emphasis may require a note of justification. Let it suffice to say that the legal profession has recognized the need for clarification of psychological issues in the problem of juvenile delinquency. While the present paper merely focuses attention on such clarification, the writer hopes it will reward the non-psychological, law-oriented reader.

a youngster commits an act or acts which either (a) transgresses the moral and ethical standards of our culture, or (b) so disturbs learned modes of satisfying basic needs (love, attention, respect, status, security) as to motivate non-conformity of social response, we may designate such activity to be delinquent. Those oriented toward the usual approach to juvenile delinquency, namely (a), will tend to reject inclusion of (b) as a criterion because of the apparent loss of functional utility and socio-legal adaptability of the term. The present paper is an exploration and defense of criterion (b).

It is common practice to assign as a direct cause of delinquency the type of physical environment in which it occurs. This practice has been a long-time obstacle to an effective attack on delinquency and has so diverted attention from central issues that many important questions have no more than been verbalized in the literature. For example, why is not all delinquency focalized in "delinquency breeding" areas?

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the "slum" environment is its almost total lack of normal activity channels. It is evident that prevailing poverty is the common denominator of such areas. Common to poverty are crowding of families, poor health conditions, lack of good recreational facilities, and other factors, all of which constitute effective barriers to adequate personality development. The availability of ideas of delinquency is ever-present. Though space freedom is reduced, child activity and sociability levels remain high for the growing, maturing youngster living in such an area. One consequence of this many times is membership in the neighborhood gang. Gangs are common to groups of children everywhere; however, the psychological needs of the individual gang member tends to determine what paths of activity the gang will follow. A fundamental factor in gang formation is that a consolidated group makes possible the acquisition of recognition and status for its members. Furthermore, the activities of gangs will surely consist of behavior which lends status to the group as a whole in its own environment. If delinquent activities fulfill the status need, then such activities will prevail.

Granted that gang formation and the slum environment are potent factors in influencing child and adolescent behavior, numerous studies and common observations suggest that they hardly constitute the *sine qua non* of juvenile delinquency. It is important to note that not all delinquency is fostered in a gang environment or stems from homes of low socio-economic level or is found in city areas generally labeled as deterioration centers.

SIBLINGS USED FOR CONTROL PURPOSES

Both the Healy and Bronner² study and that of Merrill³ are outstanding for their investigative methods in uncovering data on

² HEALY and BRONNER, NEW LIGHT ON DELINQUENCY AND ITS TREATMENT (1936).
³ MERRILL, PROBLEMS OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY (1947).

the evaluation of slum environment influence and other factors frequently taken as principal causes of delinquency. In the former study, the authors were meticulous in selecting sibling controls, i.e., members of the same homes as the delinquents with factors such as age, sex, out-of-home environment, etc., held as constant as the situation would allow. The controls were in all cases non-delinquents and were examined as closely as the delinquents themselves. The authors were continually impressed by the implications of a common situation, namely: a seriously delinquent child of a given family growing up side by side with a strictly non-delinquent sibling. This aspect of their investigation required much more than the superficial examination of both delinquent and non-delinquent personality patterns and personal histories that usually has been considered necessary in other studies. In each of the paired cases the basic root of deviate behavior appeared to be a direct result of emotional maladjustment. For 100 pairs of controls and delinquents, contrasts in developmental histories gave clear evidence of emotion stability differences.

Merrill,⁴ in her California studies, found that intelligence was not a determinant of delinquent personality; rather, for her experimental group, intelligence was distributed approximately normally. Even more significant was the fact that every delinquent was matched with a non-delinquent from the identical community environment, i.e., slum areas. She found that the area itself was hardly primarily responsible for the deviant behavior of her delinquents.

EMOTIONAL MALADJUSTMENT THE REAL CAUSE

These and other investigations have tended to eliminate most of the usual "excuse" sources of juvenile delinquency (in respect to primary cause) with the notable exception of emotional maladjustment. No significant differences were found in well-run studies between delinquents and controls for physical habits, intelligence, out-of-home environment, sex, age, position in the family, movies attended (frequency and kind), reading of questionable literature, father's occupation, etc., when any of such factors were considered in primary causal relationship to juvenile delinquency.

If one is looking for "explanations" of delinquency (rather than descriptions of its social effects) he could perhaps fruitfully shift his attention from behavioral community-level examinations and focus for a moment on the pattern of adjustment for the individual.

It is important to note that once delinquent acts have been committed, and through their commission personality needs have been satisfied, the child or adolescent may pursue such activities

⁴ *Ibid.*

indefinitely. If a personality need develops and is not satisfied, it is translated for the youngster in terms of frustration. At this point the child is "wide-open" to suggestion, the out-of-home environment playing its most influential role. Perhaps the usually well-mannered, respectable boy or girl needs status security, revenge experience, or feels an affect-deprivation or distortion. Actually, whatever signpost is at hand at the psychological moment of need may determine the path taken toward the satisfaction of that need.

THE TENDENCY TOWARD DELINQUENCY

In point of clarification, it will be worthwhile to consider the role of frustration by examining a "tendency toward delinquency" ratio:

$$\frac{F}{M} = t.d.$$

where F represents frustration due to deviated interpersonal relationships,⁵ M the degree, or level, of balanced emotional maturity,⁶ and $t.d.$ the tendency toward delinquency. Thus, if a high degree of frustration has been brought about in an individual with a low level of emotional maturity, the consequent ratio will be high, and the tendency toward the ever-present paths of delinquency will be great. On the other hand, if the F factor is low, though the M factor remains low (as is the case even with the typical well-adjusted child), the $t.d.$ will be minimal. It should be noted that inasmuch as "tendency to maladjustment" (in the broadest sense) may be substituted for $t.d.$, the behavior dynamics of the above formula are most closely identified with basic emotional adjustmental patterns.

This may be considered the primary, or first, causal formula. Once a large $t.d.$ is in effect, however, a secondary relationship (or secondary causal formula) may come into play: the $p.d.$, or "prolonged delinquency" ratio:

$$\frac{(t.d. + F + A.L.)}{P.E.} = p.d.$$

where F again represents frustration but with aspects of chronicity and generalization, $A.L.$ the activity level of the individual, and $P.E.$ referring to the net positive value of the environment. If the sum of continued frustration and high activity level is coupled with a pre-existent tendency toward delinquency ($t.d.$), and is a high value in respect to a low net value of the environment, the $p.d.$, or prolonged delinquency tendency, will be correspondingly high. Where this is the case over a period of time, it is inevitable that the child learn, through constant reinforcement (reduction of con-

⁵ Deviated human relationships refers to imbalance or absence of genuine affect-security in parent-child relationships.

⁶ Emotional maturity is here a "measure" of ability to supply adequate socially acceptable satisfactions effectively without necessary recourse to outside sources.

flict and tension), that the consequences of delinquency may be more satisfying than punishing in respect to his personality needs.

If the "set" toward juvenile delinquency is assumed here to be a high *t.d.* ratio, then, in any consideration of reduction of the incidence of delinquency and of its treatment as a social problem, a careful delineation of factors bringing about a high frustration level must be made. Actually, the *M* factor is a function of age, sex, and life experience in terms of maturation; there isn't a great deal of opportunity to modify it significantly. Assumed then, is the contention that adequate reduction of the frustration factors of formulae one and two is the basic problem in attacking juvenile delinquency. In effect, this means competent psychiatric treatment. Most of the present approaches appear to be centered upon the secondary ratio with a community level perspective. This is due to the fact that it is the level of easiest approach; it deals with aspects of the problem that are most apparent. While, in formula two, the positive value of the environment (*P.E.*) must be increased (slum clearance, etc.), it is the *F* factor of the first ratio that must be dealt with in order to sever the main roots of juvenile delinquency, that is, faulty developmental relationships.

White⁷ and others have pointed out that the process of socialization begins early and continues late in life. In broad terms, one may consider three general groups of individuals by way of their differences in reacting to the socialization process. First is the diffuse group of individuals who have been enabled to "strike an ideal bargain" in life between interests and social demands, i.e., the well adjusted persons who, perhaps through sublimation, satisfy their deepest needs in a manner both socially acceptable and of benefit to their fellowmen. A second group, the neurotics, have accepted the process of socialization, though in order to feel interpersonal security they have been forced to over-emphasize the process and find it necessary to renounce, repress, or distort aspects of it abnormally. A third group tends not to accept the process of socialization. Within this latter group falls much of juvenile delinquency. The antisocial behavior of this group may be passive or active, general or focalized, and with a very broad range of severity (i.e., rejection of the process).

OPPOSITION TO SOCIALIZATION CAUSES DELINQUENCY

Opposition to socialization is directly related to both motivation and a lack of ability on the individual's part to subordinate his core frame of reference (ego) to authority without punishing conflict.⁸ In turn, both motivation and mal-developed or dysfunctioning superego are functions of parental standards and their acquisition (or lack of it) by the child.

⁷ WHITE, THE ABNORMAL PERSONALITY (1948).

⁸ AICHHORN, WAYWARD YOUTH (1925).

The likelihood of distorted acquisition may be the product of over-satisfaction of the child's needs by the parents. A dependency pattern is adopted with the result that the child is unable to later "bargain" with societal demands in an acceptable manner. He may learn to assume the availability of satisfactions and "take" them when not offered. He has been provided little motivation to accept socialization with its compromises. In this case the child has suffered no loss of rewards in response to the antisocial tendencies inherent in normal development. At an apparent opposite pole of reaction, is the child whose parents have offered little or no rewards for socialization tendencies (expressions of love and compliance). Such parents expect the child at all times to simply accept the process of socialization according to their rigid short-sighted interpretation of it. Here it is impossible for the child to give up, adult-like, all infantile strivings on demand. However, he cannot remain indifferent to the demand, and thus will eventually demonstrate some degree of hostility toward socialization.

CONFLICT WITH PARENTAL STANDARDS SPELLS TROUBLE

Even more difficult for the child is the matter of parental inconsistency in standards, the variation of complete satisfactions with imposition of rigid demands. The nature of parental standards thus will gauge the degree and determine the manner in which the child acquires or rejects such standards. If standards are inconsistent, the child may have learned to both love and hate the parents to an unusual degree. If he persists in his attempt to find a consistent love, development may tend to neurotic over-acceptance of socialization while, if hate becomes the stronger, delinquent rejection of socialization may occur. Underlying developmental trends are molded in large part then by the degree and nature of affect-liaison between parent and child. Specific kinds of delinquent acts may thus reflect personal and symbolic meanings in respect to reaction to parental (societal) standards.

Redl⁹ writes of the gang as providing a medium through which the affect-frustrated child may be enabled to "afford" delinquency, i.e., "afford" in the sense of being able to "enjoy otherwise guilt-loaded or dangerous gratification without the expense of guilt feeling and fear." For example, the gang provides (1) easy seduction through precedent and visualization of guilt, (2) ego support through organization of ways and means, and (3) moral tax-exemption, i.e., guilt-insurance through coverage by the group code.

This rationale is seen to suggest that the affect-frustrated child may participate in gang delinquencies as a product of his own *normal* press to socialization; being unable for one or another reason to accept parental (and to him societal) standards, the

⁹ REDL, *THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE CHILD*, v. 1 (1945).

child seeks recognition and status in a separate "societal group" the excitement and suspense provoking standards of which *allow* and *reward* aggressions against the former and substitutions for affect-deprivations.

In terms of the formulae previously cited, the primary ratio may then be thought of as the affect-distortion ratio, and the secondary as the distortion-reinforcement ratio. And it is readily seen that any approach to delinquency must be concerned with both. The *M* factor of ratio one, and the *A.L.* factor of two, are, for the most part, unmodifiable; the inadequacies of environment of ratio two, however, can and must be directly altered to achieve a permanent lowering of delinquency rates. But this in itself is hardly enough. The latter attack will, in terms of criterion (a), surely reduce delinquencies but, in approach, must remain partial. Any practically complete psycho-social treatment of delinquency must sooner or later come directly to grips with the *F* factor of ratio one: the distortion of affect-liaison and affect-security (long years of understanding love, attention, and respect in the home) as basic relationships between parent and child, and as basic foundations in the matter of both deviant and acceptable behavior.

A SOCIAL WORKER LOOKS AT JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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It sounded like the usual case when the police officer began telling the court that he had arrested the fourteen year old boy, standing in front of the judge, for larceny, but it became evident that it was not the ordinary type of case when he related that he had arrested the young offender for stealing women's underwear from the clothes line of the neighbors. He also told the court that when he went to the boy's home he found stored in the attic great bundles of underwear which the boy had stolen in the past months.

At another time the court was baffled by the story of an eighteen year old boy who was charged with setting fires. The evidence showed that the young man, who was a volunteer fireman in a small community, would go to some outlying section of the community, set a fire, and then race back to the fire station so he could have the opportunity of driving the fire truck when the alarm was turned in. Another problem was presented to the court when a warehouse used for storage of large bales of scrap wool and materials was being broken into repeatedly. Facts presented in court told the story of how boys, or groups of boys, would go into this warehouse and use it for a play house. They would swing from a long rope, which hung