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Guy G. Fernald

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THE MENTAL EXAMINATION OF REFORMATORY PRISONERS¹

GUY G. FERNALD.²

The study of prisoner psychopathy and psychonosology at the Massachusetts Reformatory is the orderly consideration of the mental processes, potentialities and departures of a circumscribed, comparatively homogeneous group of adolescent males from the less cultured social classes. The average age of inmates is 21 years and the average deviation is not wide, there being very few members at the minimum age of 16 and very few above the age of 24. The psychologic significance of this age consists, of course, in its being at or near the close of that variant, the formative period.

In childhood, amusement is the natural developmental occupation. The child is actuated by impulses and feelings—under guidance, it is to be hoped—and cannot appreciate high motives and worthy ambitions which are not yet developed. The age of 15 is generally accepted as that of the normal adult mental level. Prof. William James observed years ago that very rarely does anyone after the age of 16 take up any new avocation or interest outside his own trade or profession. We observe that very few begin to learn a new trade or change their occupation after the age of 18, much less after 20. Nearly every practitioner of a worthy trade or profession began to equip himself at least as early as the middle teens, either as student or artisan. At 20 character is well formed, tastes are almost developed and habits, intellectual as well as somatic, are very difficult to change.

In the normal mental development of the late formative period, roughly between 14 and 20, appears the ambition for advancement and achievement and the capacity for immediate self-denial for ultimate good. The Grammar and High School boy whose time and energy is spent in acquisition and development has an appreciable basis for studious habits—trained ability with which to take advantage of his opportunities and realize his ambitions; but the adolescent who has wasted his energies and evenings in seeking amusement and self-gratification has accumulated a store of bad habits and perverted appetites and tastes which unfit him to succeed in the strife for advancement. His innate ability may be good, but license in the formative

¹Read before the Boston Society of Psychiatry and Neurology, April 20, 1916.

²A.M., M.D., Resident Physician, Massachusetts Reformatory, Concord.

period tends to result in an untrained will or unstable nervous organization or moral obliquity—an incubus instead of an impetus when the time for his ambition, determination, reason and judgment shall come.

It is not advanced that the youth should exhibit formed ambitions and plans for realization, but that the youthful mind should not be devoid of the elements of progress and success, its legitimate equipment. If a hiatus of study and progress occurs between the ages of 14 and 20 the task of becoming studious and diligent between 20 and 30 is to be accomplished only with great self-denial and persistent effort, mental capacities undeveloped in the interval indicated. It is not that the man who at 25 is not advancing, or even succeeding in life, is feeble-minded; but not having advanced in the late formative period, at 25 he is not prepared to advance. Cato mastered Greek at 80, but Cato was a life-long student and statesman or this feat would have been impossible. Unless the offender of 20 can be inspired with an engrossing desire for reformation from which he evolves a plan for self-sacrificing work and study to retrieve something from the golden months and years wasted in seeking self-indulgence, unless he is willing to plan to pay the price of success in terms of self-denial, he must forego reformation and real success in life. Many a young man has awakened to a sense of his need of endeavor for achievement only to find himself beyond the formative period, unfurnished with a capacity for acquisition and advancement by study, burdened with perverted tastes and handicapped by bad habits of thinking and acting.

The point is that when childish love of amusement and puerile, impulsive self-gratification are carried over into the later years of the formative period, unchecked by self-control and displacing earnest strife for success and self-culture, vicious habits of self-indulgence are formed and become established. Reasoning power, ambition and will are not to be developed by any idle, short-sighted, not to say vicious, manner of wasting the years of opportunity. An unpublished survey of 400 Reformatory inmates' records made in 1914 showed that more than 60% quit school at 14 or earlier and that the great majority had left school against advice and ignoring opportunity.

Another significant observation is that reformatory prisoners individually, after a variable intramural residence, exhibit a change in mental attitude or mood, a reaction in part at least to their simple, orderly life, with wholesome occupation and play, a change fortunately that renders them more teachable and outwardly, at least, more amenable to suggestion and more inclined to introspection than they

were on arrival. If this were not the case there would be little to justify the *raison d'etre* of the institution. On arrival, prisoners unaccustomed to an environment demanding and rewarding self-control and circumspection are not at their best in mood and they lack experience in the observance of rules, of marks of credit to be won or lost, of the rewards of obedience and thoughtfulness and of the importance of winning a favorable opinion. Time is required in the closing months of the formative period for adjustment to these new demands and for the changes in habitual manner of thinking and of attitude toward self and surroundings to take place. When men are interviewed as to their mistakes of the past and policy for the future on arrival they react far more in accordance with disposition and mood than is the case when examined later. Their later responses, mental attitude and policies are less unformed, far more considerate and better controlled. They are striving to appear at their best, a working force which is largely wanting at the outset.

Therefore the psychonosological interview is timed for the latter end of the period of incarceration, when the early feelings of resentment or homesickness or rebellion or braggadocio, as the case may be, have passed and the reactions to reasonable restraints, to regular instructive work and orderly living and to the high premium on well-doing offered by the rules and the credit system have become manifest. This change of mood or attitude is not to be mistaken, of course, for a change in the essential character of the man in this short time. Only a real character change can be consonant with the counteraction of dissolute, vicious tendencies and habits, the striving to acquire what should be learned in an earlier period or the development of moral stamina where needed development has been missed; but the reformatory regimen does bring the subject to the laboratory interview in a respectful, interested, often eager mood, one in sharp contrast to the independent, defiantly evasive or sullen attitude of the recent arrival. The moods of prisoners, as of the non-incarcerated, vary, of course and are affected by waves of sentiment or public opinion passing over the community. This fact adds another reason for a plurality of interviews for certain cases.³ Most subjects make a truer showing in any interview after the first.

Since the experimental study of 100 representative cases at the

³"Classification of Reformatory Prisoners," Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, Vol. CLXXIV, No. 8, February 24, 1916.

Reformatory, reported to this society in 1911,⁴ was completed, the determination of the mental status of inmates for classification has proceeded *pari passu* with the movement of the population; but the method of examination by applying tests uniformly has been abandoned for the clinical psychiatrist's methods. Some reasons for the change may be cited: (a) Under the former methods, the uniform application of even a limited series of tests was too time-consuming, or the results were unsatisfactory. (b) Some tests of any series were not well adapted to all subjects of a group. (c) No series of tests for general application can reveal character defects and personality asymmetries as well as this purpose may be realized by the psychiatrist's untrammelled excursions. (d) The subject is deprived by the inelasticity and cold formality of the prescribed tests, of the benefit of that personal, inspiring element in the interview which may be a potent psychic factor for the prisoner's welfare. A cut-and-dried examination may be proximately expedient, but a skillfully adapted examination is ultimately beneficial as well. The methodology of an alienist's clinical examination to determine mental status in defectives was definitely established by Dr. W. E. Fernald's authoritative paper

⁴"The Defective Delinquent Class: Differentiating Tests," American Journal of Insanity, Vol. LXVIII, No. 4, April, 1912.

TABLE I.

¹Cross-reference syllabus of psychopathic diagnoses, Massachusetts Reformatory, Concord, 1914-15.

Grades of Efficiency

Intramural Descriptive Designations.	Grades of Efficiency			Total	
	Adult	Sub- normal	Segre- gable		
Competent	Accidental offender	33	1	..	216
	Responsible offender	168	..	..
	Alcoholic	14	..	..
Deviate	Recidivist .....	..	48	20	68
	Alcoholic degenerate .....	..	55	6	61
	Congenital syphilitic .....	..	10	6	16
	Epileptic .....	..	9	4	13
	Sex pervert .....	..	3	2	5
	Insane	4	4	167
Deficient	Moron .....	..	93	..	93
	Feeble-minded .....	..	..	42	42
	Imbecile	1	1	136
Psychopath	19	56	13	..	88
Drug addict	5	2	1	..	8
Unclassified	34	8	..	..	42
Total	273	285	99	..	657
Percentage rates	42%	43%	15%	..	

⁵"The Diagnosis of the Higher Grades of Mental Defect," by Dr. W. E. Fernald, American Journal of Insanity, Vol. LXX, No. 3, January, 1914.

on the subject, read before this society in 1913.⁵ The problem presented by this group is that of the alienist, who may utilize any and all legitimate tools, with modifications perhaps, that will assist his work. His problem is one of psychical treatment as well as of medical diagnosis and classification for administrative economy.

Since several types of mental peculiarity, as well as several grades of mental efficiency naturally present themselves and, moreover, must be recognized in any adequate classification, the simple survey presented takes cognizance of three grades of mental efficiency out of the much larger number that are available. Eight or ten varieties of mental departure present themselves as serving well the purpose of checking up and contrasting. The classification attempted in this survey is submitted as tentative only and convenient for use in studying this restricted and fairly homogeneous group. Nothing new appears except the cross-reference features of examination and presentation by which are combined and contrasted the diagnosis of kinds of departure with estimates of degrees of efficiency.

SURVEY

The line of demarcation between normal and subnormal divides definite entities, though drawn where differences are very small, e. g., between mental age levels of 12 and 13 or 13 and 14, and there are borderline cases inevitably. This line may be conceived to distinguish between those whose mental age corresponds fairly closely to their chronological age, departing therefrom roughly by not more than a year or two, and those whose mental capacity is distinctly below that of their normal age level—in other words, between the competent and those who lack capacity in some definite mental quality or complex of qualities and in some demonstrable though small, degree. This line of demarcation, while useful, is of necessity arbitrary, but is not whimsical. It is the line most often drawn by students of sociological conditions among prisoners, and has been found by various observers studying different criminological groups to fall anywhere between 25% and 89% of the population. In the Reformatory group it stands at 58%. Those of the subnormal grade are able to support themselves honestly if they choose to do so. Their responsibility for their acts is not limited. Many unskilled laborers are of this class, but not all. To call all unskilled laborers subnormal, whether in prison or not, would be to commit a flagrant error. Subnormal prisoners, then, are those who nevertheless can react well to the Reformatory discipline, work and teaching.

⁵"The Diagnosis of the Higher Grades of Mental Defect," by Dr. W. E. Fernald, *American Journal of Insanity*, Vol. LXX, No. 3, January, 1914.

A consideration of much significance in the differentiation of degrees of efficiency is the measure of ability to succeed in competition or achievement. Some of the highest mental qualities are involved in this complex: initiative, ambition and constructive thinking, perseverance, patience, foresight, capacity for work and self-denial, judgment and reason. Another consideration in determining status in the higher grades of mental ability is the application of a questionnaire, which obviously would best be extemporaneous and adapted to the industrial, social and educational experience of the subject in an attempt to measure his capacity to draw or acquiesce in logical conclusions, especially when such are disagreeable to him. While distasteful to a thief to be led to confess that logically he should admit his guilt to himself and the examiner in order to start his plan for the future on a right basis, such procedure may be salutary nevertheless. Thieves who resist this admission may be actuated for the moment at least by impulse and feelings rather than by reason and training. The testing of this complex seems not to be susceptible of numerical scoring; yet the subject's reaction in this delicate situation is illuminating.

In contrast to those of normal and subnormal mentality, those of segregation grade, otherwise the defective delinquent class are regarded as incapable of honest self-support without surveillance. They sink into indigence, vagrancy or dishonesty if left to their own devices. Their responsibility is attenuated and they cannot be expected to measure up to the ordinary standards of morality or productivity. They conform to no type except that of degenerate subnormality, and vary widely in disposition and in variety and degree of divergence, a not unexpected phenomenon, as differences between abnormal units is greater, of course, than between those which are normal. The presence of this group in any institution is a distinct retardation to the progress of the normal and subnormal groups. The line of demarcation between the subnormal and those of segregation grade is, however, *the* important one to draw in the case of the group under consideration, not only for the immediate benefit of the individual prisoner and of all prisoners, but also for its scientific value; since to know just who can succeed in honest self-support is more vital than knowledge of those less severely handicapped. It is an academically interesting question to determine the subnormal whose chances for success are diminished, but it is essential to know those who cannot succeed.

A striking characteristic of the segregable is a lack of ordinary foresight and regard for consequences, often expressed in terms of:

- (a) Readiness to falsify, and
- (b) Egotism, a manifest corollary of which is lack of regard for the rights and claims of others.

Most of the segregable cases, otherwise the defective delinquent class, present some deficiency traceable to germ plasm defect, manifest in some form of arrested or retarded development. It is not that something has been added to their mental equipment, an appetite or tendency to criminality; but rather that their mentality is deprived of something, an inhibition or an ability or a complex of such.

Aberrations of kind or variety may be briefly connoted as follows: The Accidental Offender has ability and is relatively inexperienced in vice. He is free from grave character defects and reacts well to the consequences of his error. The Responsible Offender also has good ability, but may show a character defect in his repeated lapses of conduct or in his disappointing reactions to social, moral or legal requirements and to court and penal discipline. The Alcoholic sins in or because of his abuse of alcoholic stimulants, but his potations have left no marked evidence of mental deterioration. These prisoners often urge that they never steal or assault except after drinking, and to the unthinking offenders of this class drinking is sufficient excuse for their offenses. The Recidivists are repeated or habitual offenders. These, with all the deviates, cannot be classified as normal. They show grave character defects or temperamental instability and often lack a capacity to foresee consequences and a wish to discontinue their obliquity. Many of them are distinctly anti-social in attitude and most of them excuse or defend their wrong-doing. Some are glib talkers and skillfully urge sophistries for their conduct which others cannot accept. Some abuse or neglect wife or dependents and some are panderers or otherwise show lack of amenability to the higher motives. An Alcoholic Degenerate is one whose continued indulgence has resulted in a definite weakening of character or diminution of productive capacity or in blunting of the finer sensibilities; so that responsibility is ignored, also the claims of kinship, altruism, patriotism or those of self-advancement, self-control, etc. Some of this class are also Recidivists.

The Congenital Syphilitic presents a considerable variety of mental symptoms of degeneracy or enfeeblement. No distinct symptomatology appears as yet. An impetus has been given the study of this class by the advent of the Wassermann reaction. The differentiation of the class depends, in fact, on the demonstration of a syphilis which is not acquired in a deviate. The Psychopaths are those whose mental

faculties as tested seriatim may be at the normal level or below that level, with impaired ability to co-ordinate their mental functions and to act wisely in the crises of social life as presented by temptation under fear, hunger, anger, etc. Their judgments under stress are generally poor instead of occasionally so, though their academic knowledge may be adequate. As Dr. V. V. Anderson of the Boston Municipal Court has vividly characterized this class: "They are hampered with a constitutional instability of the nervous system, which renders them impulsive, vehement, inhibitionless and emotional; in other words, they are easily unbalanced, and thus especially liable to serious social difficulties in a complex environment."⁶ In attempting to set forth the psychopathy of any group completely, their heredity could not be ignored; but in briefly characterizing this group of male adolescents a discussion of heredity must be omitted.

Any adequate study of the psychonology of prisoners must be intensive at least with selected cases, e. g., borderline cases. Repeated interviews and varied tests are necessary. The anamnesis must be checked up and validated; since prisoners are notoriously untruthful and untrustworthy. Moreover, some of them are adepts at deceiving. Furthermore, prisoners are clannish, a fact that may suggest a foundation for that fallacious aphorism regarding "honor among thieves," and being clannish and ever ready to "put one over" on the administration they post each other on every possible point. Inside information on tests and administrative information generally is a stock in trade and passes current in the underworld of the prisoner not only for its own value in tobacco, etc., but enhanced by the delight of outwitting the "high brows." The ethical and disciplinary restraints enlisted to control the practice of cribbing in college examinations would be a rope of sand to restrain the illicit traffic of prisoners. Of course, if a prisoner cannot compute simple interest he is not especially interested to know by the underground route that he may be given examples by the "Doctor"; but if he learns also that no two examples given out are identical, he is inspired to nothing harmful, only to study the whole subject possibly. The rapidity with which rumors travel among prisoners enjoying the freedom of speech allowed at the Reformatory is remarkable and, to the novice, unbelievable. Tests must be devised and all laboratory procedure adapted with reference to this phenomenon. The above-cited traits indicate not the astuteness and high

⁶"A Proper Classification of Borderline Mental Cases Amongst Offenders," by Dr. V. V. Anderson, Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, Vol. CLXXIII, No. 13, September, 1915.

average capacity of the prison population, but the superficial shrewdness and unprincipled boyishness of certain temperaments and schools of vicious training. No one familiar with groups of prisoners would suppose for a moment that the superficial shrewdness above alluded to is a characteristic of the whole personnel. There is a wide difference, of course, between a capacity for tittle-tattle and innuendo, for petty intrigue and double-dealing and a capacity for foresightedness, for preparedness and for the ability to profit by past failures in planning for a happy and successful life, and, moreover, proficiency in the former activities is by no means a good augury for the realization of the latter acquisitions. The habitual attitude of suspended judgment, which is a *sine non qua* of all successful disciplinarians of prisoners, is difficult to acquire for those accustomed to an atmosphere of truth; and this open-mindedness degenerates in the case of some unsuccessful disciplinarians into habitual unthinking suspicion. Costly mistakes will surely be made by anyone who does not check up all prisoners' statements before pronouncing judgment.

The essential equipment for a mental examination, that requisite without which no results are reliable, is, of course, full systematically arranged information on the life activities of the subject to be examined. This essential information is collected from all possible sources and must check up with the subject's story or the discrepancies be accounted for. The services of those especially skilled and adapted by temperament and special training to handle prisoners and to do good scientific work of a most exacting kind must be secured. The information so furnished embodies the vital statistics of the subject and information of hereditary diseases and tendencies, of habits, incarcerations and causes of death of ascendants and siblings. Other essential information regarding the subject relates to his home life, early and late, his reactions to instruction, to discipline and the kind of discipline, his school experiences, early and late successes and failures, his church affiliations and reactions to social and industrial situations, his arrests, incarcerations, undetected offenses, his friends, his loves, his amusements, his savings, his conduct record and other reactions, such as those to court procedure and reformatory discipline, his reformatory industrial record and school record. All the available information of which the above is an outline is presented systematically arranged by the field investigator, aided by a stenographer and dictagraph, and is always at hand at the psychological laboratory in anticipation of the subject's arrival. The content of the investigator's systematically arranged calendar is rapidly absorbed by the medical

examiner while the subject is occupied with tests, so that the line of inquiry the examination should take is clearly indicated.

It is essential, of course, that the examiner and his subject be alone and free from distracting stimuli and that entire harmony and cordiality of feeling obtain. The sequestration of the subject and the examiner from all distracting sights and sounds is to be secured. Such unnecessarily displayed devices as a ticking recording clock, rattling typewriter, formidable apparatus, numerous stimuli cards, etc., should not be in evidence. Material for the application of tests must be at hand, but is to be unostentatiously produced only when needed. Besides an armamentarium of quickly applied psychologic, psychonosologic and scholastic tests, the examiner draws on a fund of conversational and easily adapted devices readily adjusted to the social, industrial and educational experience of the subject, which may be applied while notes are taken. By such means access is obtained to the subject's thinking, his purity of motive, sincerity, veracity, his capacity for work, for self-criticism, for planning advancement involving purposeful self denial. If his measure, already taken suggests, investigation may be made of the developmental state of his ambitions, of his altruism, his benevolence, loyalty, judgment, reasoning power, appreciation of logic, ability to control expression of will and to analyze thoughts and emotions.

Moreover, the examination should acquaint the medical examiner with all the essential facts of the subject's present mental state. His governing motives, past and recently formed, are brought out. His damaging habits of thought and action, his attitude toward a continuance therein and his plans and potentialities relating thereto are included. Certain mental complexes not susceptible of numerical scoring or exact determination are nevertheless open to investigation with reference to phase of development and dynamics. Among these may be mentioned conscience, principle, honesty, integrity, character defects and stability, ability to resist temptation and faulty co-ordination.

The last point of this presentation deals with the double purpose of the psychonosological interview. As has been intimated, the tests applied and the whole content of the interview may be adapted to secure not only the proximate purpose of providing a basis for a classification diagnosis; but also to secure the ultimate purpose of influencing the subject and extending the institution's welfare work with individuals. The reformatory value of a skillfully conducted psychonosological interview is too great to be overlooked. Preparation for the prosecution of this double-purpose interview is acquired

with experience. A few illustrations may suffice for clarity. It is more enlightening to the examiner and inspiring to the examined; if, instead of contrasting the members of word couplets not susceptible of a personal application, the meaning and distinction of such words as "intention" and "impulse" or of "pleasure" and "happiness" or of "truth" and "expediency" be taught and concrete illustrations be drawn from the subject's own career. Treated in this manner the issues of the interview are no longer personal and dogmatic; but become animate with life and interest.

The possibilities of influencing a prisoner's thinking favorably in the domain of vocational guidance are not overlooked in discussing the importance of acquiring industrial proficiency in one or another occupation. Few men are likely to rise above the ranks of unskilled laborers who resist the suggestion of the value of specially trained skill or who shrink from the self-denial involved. Almost all inmates of the reformatory have good intentions, certainly when at their best; but few realize that having good intentions is only the first and least consequential of three steps necessary to reformation, viz: (a) good intentions, (b) the making of a plan by which one may live for a definite period while practising reformation and seeking advancement, and (c) the living of the plan for the time specified. Many subjects can grasp the meaning and importance of these considerations as they are unfolded and illustrated and are really impressed by the teaching that only the first two of these steps can be taken within the walls while the third step, the living of the plan may be wrought out only after release.

A man's reaction to the idea that he write out his own plan of how he may live day and evening for say five years while he practises reformation and the learning of a trade simultaneously may reveal the inability or disinclination to react favorably to such a stimulus, or it may rouse the eager enthusiasm of the hyper-suggestible or the quiet flash of the eye or set of jaw hinting at awakened determination.

A thinking capacity test well adapted to the group under consideration asks how one should proceed who really wishes to make his own the valuable points of the interview, so as to retain them for future use. Very few indeed think of the expediency of writing out at the first opportunity all that can be recalled, yet very few to whom the suggestion is made fail to grasp its significance.

There are several ways of bringing a man to face the question of whether he is a liar and that without alienating his co-operation and

good-will. In showing a subject by the Socratic method that he has or has not unconsciously trained himself to give those replies on which he thinks he can "get by" instead of those which are true, the examiner both applies a good test and leaves food for reflection with his subject.

The question of why so many prisoners lead no better lives after release provokes a variety of reactions, some very poor as well as some very good answers. The examiner's answer to this question is that most men mistake good intentions to "go straight" as some sort of guarantee against failure, and thus ignore the importance of a plan and of work and self-denial for a definite period in the realization of the plan. This suggestion sometimes lets a flood of light into a mind needing and welcoming such and again the response is disappointing. An act of kindness, self control or self sacrifice from the case history may be the point of departure for a search for real motives whether worthy or unworthy.

The following dialogue quoted from a case record illustrates an attempt to test and to stimulate thinking and reasoning ability without ignoring prisoner welfare: Have you reformed? "Why, yes, sir." You intend to reform, I hope; but you really cannot reform in here. Do you know why? "No." Because you can't meet the temptations in here that you must meet outside. You on the inside could not fight a man on the outside, could you? "No." But this is a good place for you or anyone else who ought to reform. How can that be when you cannot reform here? "I don't see." The boy in high school is in a good place for him if he expects to go to college, isn't he? "Yes." Well, now do you see how this is a good place for one who should reform? "Oh, yes, a good place to get ready in." How long will it take you to reform? "Oh, I can get a job right off and then I'll be all right. I'm going to keep away from the gang." Let's see, we found you'd been wasting your evenings looking for amusement for the past five years, didn't we? "Yes." Well, in how much shorter time do you think you can make up what you have lost in the days and evenings of those five years? "Well, it wouldn't take five years." But you can't learn as easily now as you could five years ago, etc.

In conclusion then the psychiatrist's method of examination with its flexibility in application and inclusiveness as to means employed enables classification of this group of mentalities ranging roughly from imbecility to adult into three or more grades of mental efficiency. As employed in studying the rather rapidly shifting reformatory population it has been satisfactory, having enabled the tentative differentiation of the competent, deviate and deficient classes and their subdivision into diagnoses of variety of mental departure with cross-references to adult, subnormal and segregable grades.