

Summer 1939

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Recommended Citation

F. Emory Lyon, Psychology and Crime, 30 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 223 (1939-1940)

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PSYCHOLOGY AND CRIME

F. EMORY LYON¹

Next to the discovery of a new truth is the new application of an old truth to fit the knowledge and needs of a living age. This was done in the century just closed in the new application of psychology to the practical affairs of life. The mastery of mind in the abstract was a fitting task for the giant philosophers of the scholastic period. But the child-psychology of a Froebel, or the physiological psychology of a James, are more acceptable to a generation of living, feeling, moving beings.

From the consideration of psychical entities as factors in purely speculative philosophy, to the study of an actual brain as the instrument for the expression of real life is a far cry. But it is a welcome one to this practical, acting age. Thereby the chasm has been bridged between two divergent lines of philosophy. Each was endeavoring to disengage the physical from the mental. One was lost in the mysticism of possible mental states, independent of the body. The other, conceiving the body as an ideal chemical laboratory, tried to interpret all its phenomena in terms mechanical. Each was as empirical and impossible as the other.

Then it was, when two tendencies were about "gone to seed" that great discoveries were disclosed in the domain of human life. Upon the one hand the physicists were rapidly learning (not a few reluctantly admitting) that the body is not a dead crucible, but a living organism with which they must ever reckon as of greater potency than any medicine or food. On the other hand, the moment the Psychologists extended their study of the laws of thought to the brain, the instrument of all known mentation, they found that the paths of thought are almost as endless as their former speculations had been. They learned that grey matter, identical with that of the brain, extends into the spinal column and that all our nerve processes are thought expressions.

With these two discoveries before us, then, we can understand now that no physical ailment can be intelligently considered, or treated, without a proper recognition of the power of mind over

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matter. Nor will the disordered brain be expected to return to perfect and permanent sanity while there is an enfeebled and abnormal physical condition. But the intimate relation and interdependence of mind and body, here touched upon, are only a part of a yet greater discovery and preliminary to it. It seems to be true that great inventions and discoveries are apt to be simultaneous.

So Sociology came to the world contemporaneously with many other strides of science, to teach us that, as no one science can be studied well without knowing its relation to all other sciences, so the individual man should not be considered independently of his relation to humanity. His body is either a menace or contributor to the civic health. As a hermit he may be a healthy animal. Not so the mind, for man is a social being. In isolation he loses his mind and becomes a maniac. The normal mind must strike its roots into both the physical and social soil. No less a scientist than George Henry Lewes claims to be the first writer to formulate this thought. At any rate, it is the double dependence of the mind that lends significance to the subject of this essay. It is this that makes crime not a matter of physical heredity merely, but one of social responsibility as well.

As there are no born consumptives, so there are no born criminals. It is only with a tendency to either that any mortal can be endowed. But, as we endeavor to eliminate the consumptive diatheses, so may we lessen the tendency to crime. We were none of us consulted as to how or where we should be born. And unfortunately, those who have the most unfavorable birthright, have also the least to say as to what their environment shall be. Let us not, therefore, soothe our consciences by laying belated blame or posthumous pity at the door of our ancestors. To be sure a responsible being should be held accountable in great measure if he has not overcome the evil tendencies of his nature, or if he has not become master of his environment. But meantime shall we forget the responsibility of those who gave him more than a fair heritage of evil tendencies? Shall we shirk the present social responsibility for the evil institutions that make his self mastery doubly difficult?

But it is not the object of this article to point a moral, so much as to relate some of the results of several years experience in dealing at first hand with those who have been in prison. As Superintendent of The Central Howard Association, engaged in securing employment for ex-prisoners and otherwise aiding them,

the writer has had ample opportunity to note the pathological attitude of the ex-prisoner toward society. That this attitude must be spoken of as pathological, is not however, as I have already intimated, wholly the fault of the individual. If society had sooner recognized to what extent the problem of Criminology is a Psychological one, the anti-social symptoms would now be far less marked. Because of the false and unthinking attitude of society toward the prisoner he became the victim of a bad line of suggestion that helps to weaken his will and break down his manhood.

Let us pause to observe how the thought-force of others adversely applied, contributes to the causes of crime. Here is a gathering of women in a sewing circle or missionary tea. They are talking about Tom, the son of the woman who is not present. They tell how bad he is becoming. They say he drinks, "What a shame! So young too." The prophetess speaks: "He'll go wrong yet, you see if he don't." Science and sympathy are combined in the final utterance: "Oh! Well, he can't help it, poor fellow, it's born in him." The women separate, but not so the psychic coterie of condemnation they have centered upon the unfortunate head of Tom. Does anyone believe he does not feel its influence? He grows more reckless and proceeds to do what they thought and spoke him into doing. Finally, in a daring spree he commits a crime. The wise wag their heads and say, "I told you so." He goes to jail and the pious populace peer through the bars at him as if he were suddenly a thing apart,—something other than a man. He knows he has a thousand good impulses to the one bad one expressed, but no one believes it. All act as if they expect him henceforth to be a human monster. He is sent to the penitentiary and branded as a "Criminal." His personality is exchanged for a number. His keepers, it may be with little knowledge of human nature, and less character, proceed to crush his self assertion, and with it his self-respect. They tell him at the end of his term, (not to analyze the interim) that he will surely be back in three months, or in six at most. This lack of confidence begets lack of confidence in himself. Still he goes out with a new-born purpose. But will the infant survive the look askance, and the inexorable, but ignorant pronouncement,—"Once a criminal always a criminal?"

Though he have a will of iron, can it combat the combined psychic suggestion of a whole prejudiced community? The man's position at this critical time is well described in the following words of one who speaks from experience:—"The man comes out

after serving a few years, with his habits of observation lost; he is secretive, non-communicative, with no confidence in himself and little in others. He has lost the art of expressing himself properly, or timely, even in ordinary conversation; he hesitates and is nervous and embarrassed from consciousness of his deficiencies. He loses opportunities of securing employment through his inability to place the subject in hand in the right words at the right moment. His powers of observation and interest in his surroundings have been so long curbed by fear that they have become dormant and his chances for employment and advancement are in consequence so much less that they soon become apparent to him and embitter him against the world in general."

Now, then, the question is how far can this situation be changed by a specific line of suggestive treatment. To what extent can the negative influence be counteracted by the positive, reassuring and uplifting? If suggestive therapeutics are of value in the treatment of the physical invalid, will not suggestion-therapy have a still more direct effect in the restoration of this psychical invalid? As a matter of fact, we find it a practical and powerful means of restoration. Here is a man who has paid the penalty of his crime and has formed a better purpose. The fulfillment of that purpose depends upon his being surrounded by people and influences that will nourish and foster and cherish that impulse until it becomes the dominating purpose of his life.

This is done in the work of The Central Howard Association by putting him into normal environment and surrounding him with healthful influences. Employment is secured with an employer who knows he is hiring an ex-prisoner, and the man enters upon his new opportunity with his head up, and a light heart. The positive is always stronger than the negative, and faith begets faith. Is it surprising, therefore, that by multiplying favorable conditions marvelous results are accomplished? Of the men helped during the last several years with this method always in mind, a large per cent have been permanently and effectually helped to good citizenship. To be sure, the majority of these have been what would be called "accidental criminals" with little or no hereditary taint or tendency.

But I am quite persuaded that the law of suggestion, as a post-prison force, if applied persistently, and perhaps under relaxed conditions, will largely overcome both heredity in the sense of a generally assumed fatalism which marks the man beyond redemption, and environment which, though it demoralizes and embitters, yet

cannot deprive the man of the Divine Image, which may be discovered and asserted.

The difference between the accidental and the habitual criminal is, after all, only a matter of time. The initial and producing causes in each case were the same. The accidental criminal is the acute invalid, who most likely came to his estate through some neuresthenic impulse. The habitual offender is the chronic invalid. But if we go back far enough we shall find the neuresthenic impulse that started his anti-social career. Vicious prison systems, and the irrational attitude of society did the rest.

But more, far more, can be accomplished in the opposite direction by the strong, reassuring, healthful influences. Suggestion-therapy, as applied in this direction, must, of course, be positive and uplifting. It must re-inspire courage and confidence in the subject. It must tend to replace baneful habits of life, thought and sensation with wholesome ones. It must direct an otherwise aimless life in a normal direction and fill it with a purpose nobler than it has ever known.

To be sure, the problem of the criminal is far more than a psychological one merely. It is also an industrial problem. Not only should the prisoner have the right kind of work, but the first essential after his release is the opportunity to earn an honest living. "The first civilizing influence," says Ex-President Eliot, "is ready work." The next is culture and refinement." This last need brings to our thoughts the educational aspect of the problem. It would be trite to say that ignorance and crime are as brother and sister.

Many would say that the question is primarily a religious one. And while the most effectual element in the reformation of a criminal will doubtless always be in instilling in him a definite religious impulse, yet that impulse must be applied to all the practical affairs and temptations of life. It is this fact which makes the problem so largely a temperance one. By far the largest number of crimes may be traced directly or indirectly to intemperance. Then there is the legislative phase of the problem, involved in unequal sentences for the same crime, and definite sentence without considering the degree of real culpability.

Altogether, the question readily assumes the proportions of a great race problem, which cannot be solved by any one panacea, nor yet by aiding this or that class or condition or color, alone, but by the uplift of the race as a whole.