

Summer 1940

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Recommended Citation

Nathaniel Cantor, *The Social Treatment of the Adult Offender*, 31 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 30 (1940-1941)

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THE SOCIAL TREATMENT OF THE ADULT OFFENDER¹

Nathaniel Cantor²

We all agree that in order to build a social program for treating offenders, that is, in order to prevent further crime, it would be desirable to discover and remove, if possible, the factors which generate crime careers.

I

The study of criminal behavior can be approached from several angles. The several approaches are not at all mutually exclusive. Indeed, they provide views of the same phenomena on different levels. For example, we can study the *material* causes which generate the setting for criminal behavior. This necessarily leads to an analysis of the social and economic patterns of contemporary American life. Or we may be interested in the *efficient* causes of crime. This raises such questions as, "Why do *individuals* become criminals?" and "Can *individuals* be prevented from becoming criminals?"

It should appear obvious that whatever the cultural conditions are which produce criminal behavior, they finally operate through and only through the personality of the offender. No less true is it that the criminal-mindedness of the offender reflects the surroundings in which he moves, lives, and has his being.

In seeking for the causes of crime we must not confuse the search for the material conditions which provide the setting for crime with the psychological drives of the individual which lead him to criminal activity. Both points of view are legitimate and complementary. It is as futile to emphasize one as it is to deny the other. We wish to comment on both points of view.

What are the material causes of crime? The delinquency areas of our large cities are characterized by poor housing conditions, congestion, lack of supervised recreational activities, and a generally reduced standard of living. The majority of adult offenders have had little schooling, they are unskilled workmen, their employment record had been poor, and their family life unwholesome. The majority of criminals belong to economically disadvantaged groups.

American students agree in general that crime reflects widespread social and economic disorganization. These are the material conditions which may lead to crime. Whether these conditions will become operative depends upon the types of individuals exposed to them. This leads us to the other question, "What are efficient causes of crime?"

¹ Read at the National Conference of Social Work, June 1939, Buffalo, N. Y.

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All behavior is symptomatic of the needs of individuals. Everyone of us possesses dynamic drives which must be expressed in one form or another. The two most basic psychological needs, I believe, are the desire for security or dependence, and the desire for independence or self-expression. So long as we live the dilemma between wanting to be like others and wanting to be different from others confronts us. Security, protection, and dependence are longed for, sought for and achieved,—only to be repudiated by the incessant demand to express oneself, to dominate,—and the pendulum starts its counterswing.

Most of us are neither anarchic in our claims for self nor beaten into dulled submission by the claims of others. Most of us achieve working balances between the claims of self and the demands of others which are discovered and rediscovered in light of our dynamic experiences. Most individuals are not handicapped by this bipolar conflict.

What happens, however, to those who succumb to the fear of a reality which dominates them or who insist upon dominating others? They are trapped by society or by their own self. They are consumed by fears or consume themselves and others by their hunger for power in one form or another.

Their surroundings have provided them with too much or too little security, too much or too little authority. Such personalities are out of balance with their environments and with themselves. Instead of recognizing and

accepting this fact, they deny it and then either conceal, distort, or create attitudes and engage in the appropriate behavior which justifies their actions.

Much delinquency is an expression of emotional conflict. Delinquent behavior is often the compensating substitute for the real feelings which the criminal denies he experiences because he fears to recognize them and dares not express them. To accept the responsibility for his real feelings would be to expose himself to the greater danger of being condemned by others. Few could withstand the overpowering sense of guilt which would accompany revealing one's innermost sense of being so different from others.

A perplexing question arises at this point. What accounts for the specific goals which handicapped personalities strive for? Why do any of us behave as we do? We all have more or less deep-seated conflicts. Although all of us commit many delinquent acts few of us engage in crime serious enough to bring us to trial and prison.

The question cannot be answered satisfactorily because not enough is known. A general answer, however, is possible. The differentials of behavior depend on external accidental circumstances, inherent differences in basic personality-patterns, and the manner in which we react to the environment.

This last point must be stressed. We must try to understand why at any time the personality selects from the environment what it does and how what is selected is altered to fit the constellation of the personality. Per-

haps all that is being said is that we must seek to understand what experience *means* to an individual at any one time.

It is at this point that the material and efficient causes of crime operate as a dynamic whole. Given certain surroundings one *may* commit crime. Whether one will or not depends upon one's attitudes at the time; upon tensions which are operating and the form of release obtained—which may be an overt criminal act.

What are some of the principal ways which modern society offers to the protesting individual who seeks release of tensions? In other words, what does being "successful" mean in our society? One can be successful in school, sports, art, learning, friendship, or profession. Primarily, however, economic status sets the standards of success.

Competitive striving in itself is normal in our culture as in all group life. It is the struggle for *economic* dominance which characterizes our particular society. Competitive striving in itself does not signify a distorted personality. We want to excel in what we are doing. One proceeds to get ahead because *objective* realities compel us to match our strength against the strength of others.

It is important, however, to distinguish the strivings of those who are psychologically secure from those who are insecure. The *attitudes* behind competition, the meaning of the struggle to the individual, will determine whether the activity is normal or compulsive. The insecure personality often strives for

economic goods, power and prestige as symbols to others of his status.

The overtones of success and competition reverberate through all the major institutions of our economic society. To be financially secure, or to be admired for the values accompanying wealth is harped upon in the family, school, radio newspaper, and movies.

Individual needs are artificially stimulated by advertising. To acquire automobiles, clothes, school-girl complexions, white teeth, soft hands, Hollywood facials, furniture, and thousands of other things is to obtain status. The wherewithal to satisfy many of these "status-preserving" needs is not present and their frustration makes for dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Most people do not get very far in achieving wealth. Instead a sense of helplessness and failure slowly corrodes one's self-esteem.

Emotional conflicts are generated by our competitive society from still another angle, that of the conflict between the formal ideals of, and actual practices in, society. Parents, teachers, and religious leaders impress youth with ideals of cooperation and loving-one-another. The virtues of kindness, modesty, charity, tolerance, and understanding are *talked* about. But generally, in our society, if one is retiring, genuinely cooperative, unassuming, and unaggressive, he does not get very far. His self-esteem is crushed. He feels inferior and inadequate. This, in turn, breeds hostility and resentment in him. Conflict follows. When the emotional stresses become too intense, some in-

dividuals fail to make normal adjustments.

The feelings of frustration, fear, guilt, inadequacy, and restlessness cannot, for many individuals, be admitted and recognized. They are denied or repressed and compensatory behavior in the form of delinquency is substituted.

The criminals to which the above thesis refers are those individuals who, from childhood days on throughout the years, show an undeviating pattern of lawless, aggressive, anti-social behavior. They are characterized by strong wills which have taken a negative instead of a positive direction. The direction taken by these defeated individuals to preserve their personality-status is largely shaped by the general cultural pressures of an economic, competitive society. Their psychological needs become the efficient factors which select, assimilate, and transform the elements in the material surroundings which satisfy their needs.

II

An efficient program for the social treatment of the adult offender requires that the roots of the disorder be discovered. Only if we understand what is really wrong can we hope to formulate a successful prevention or treatment program.

The thesis stated above appears simple. Nevertheless, it seems to me to be the most reasonable general explanation of crime causation in light of the facts at hand. The thesis states that our widespread social and economic disorganization breeds psychological insecurity and inadequacy among in-

dividuals. Many of them, suffering from unusual emotional conflicts, fail to make socially acceptable adjustments. Frustrated, fearful, and rebellious, they react against social authority and are led to lives of crime.

This thesis implies that to prevent crime we must modify our social and economic institutions as well as try to rid the present generation of adult criminals of their drive to crime.

A sound treatment program requires an attack on two fronts. Crime prevention in any fundamental sense involves radical modifications of our present social and economic institutions. The intelligent citizen will support all orderly changes which promise to remove the *conditions* which encourage and sustain delinquent behavior. In the meantime we are faced with thousands of adult offenders. How can we treat this problem? Here we deal with crime prevention in a narrower sense, viz., treating the offender so as to remove the efficient causes of crime. The problem is not that of altering material conditions so much as of changing personalities (although the two approaches, as we have indicated, are complementary). Accepting the limitations of the environment what can we do to help the offender?

I should like to confine myself to one aspect of the social treatment of adult offenders, namely, the supervisory treatment of adult offenders, provided him by the state. I refer to the techniques of probation and parole supervision.

We have written and spoken so much about probation and parole, that it has

become tiresome. Yet, I feel that these important areas in the treatment of the adult offender have not yet been fully explored. I wish to confine myself, therefore, to making clear what I consider to be meaningful probation and parole supervision. What we shall say will apply to both probation and parole supervision.

The first charge to be made is that relatively few probation or parole officers are engaged in any meaningful experiences with their clients. With what is the officer faced? He has before him a living human being with all sorts of conflicts. I am assuming something of which I am personally convinced, namely, that everyone of us, offenders and non-offenders, rarely, if ever, is able to discuss with others our fundamental emotional disturbances. We have too much at stake, and the person to whom we are trying to talk has too much at stake. How much difficulty then must there be for an offender to expose himself and establish the kind of relationship with an officer which will permit him to be himself!

I am further assuming that the trouble with a great many, if not a majority of adult offenders, lies in the emotional sphere. Recent research has validly demonstrated, I think, the soundness of this assumption. A person who is mentally hygienic, simply cannot commit a serious crime. I take it that the principal task of a probation or parole officer is to help the offender find for himself an emotional balance which will keep him from ever again engaging in such deviating behavior which will get him into trouble with the law.

The task of the officer is to help the inmate bring to conscious expression the underlying emotional conflicts and thus rid these deep-seated unknown drives of their tension. The client must be helped to understand his own difficulties. The morale decisions of the inmate must be his own and not those of the worker.

Experienced officers have learned time and again the futility of assuming the responsibility of making decisions for their clients. That is precisely what the client wants, a shifting of *his* responsibility to others. The client has been doing that for years, and this is precisely what should not occur. The worker, even if he could, should not interpret the inmate's conflicts for him. All that is necessary is to give the inmate a chance to be himself, to express himself without fear of criticism, to face his own limitations, to admit to himself what he had previously sought to deny. Once the inmate dares to face his denials the worker may be able to help him in adjustment.

In brief, the officer's job is to accept and understand what the *present* experiences of the inmate actively *mean to the inmate*. The therapist accepts the attitudes of the client and helps him to understand himself. The emotional stability of the individual is the end-view of probation and parole work.

Probation and parole work is both a subject-matter and an approach. The subject-matter, broadly speaking, is the living interview. More narrowly, it is an analysis of how to approach definitely maladjusted individuals. *What* techniques are employed in the interview is the subject-matter of this embryonic

discipline of probation and parole work. *How* they are employed constitutes the approach. If the above presentation is clear, it follows that all probation and parole workers will profit from the study of the subject-matter and, it is equally obvious, that the approach will be unique in every case, depending both upon the skill and sensitivity of the particular worker and the peculiar conflicts presented by the particular inmate. The privilege of probation or parole does not in itself help the individual. It is what happens between the officer and the client which is important.

Probation and parole services, it must be emphasized, are set up by the state. The elements of legal restriction and state authority enter the situation of the probationer and parolee. There are rules and regulations which must be imposed and enforced whether the client is pleased or aggrieved. The probation or parole officer must recognize and accept the limitations within which he must work. His function is determined and limited by the type of agency and its functions.

The elements of authority and restriction are present. They should be recognized and utilized. As a matter of technique these elements, which are apparently limiting elements, can be used to good advantage. It is not authority or restriction which we resent but the *manner* in which they are exercised. Every one of us is daily subjected to restrictions. If we understand their need we accept them.

It is the imposition especially of arbitrary and unreasonable conditions of probation or parole that the proba-

tioner or parolee resents. The routine laid down by the probation and parole departments is often way beyond the capacities of the offenders. They simply cannot, being the kind of people they are, live up to the values demanded of them. The program of treatment must relate to the *client's* capacity to profit from the plan.

What happens if the client cannot or does not want to profit from this form of "relationship therapy?" The officer must then rely upon the deterrent effect of returning the client for violation of the conditions of probation and parole. Similarly, if an understanding parent cannot gain the confidence and cooperation of a child who has misbehaved in the family circle authority must be resorted to, and the child is sent to his room or disciplined in some other way. The weapon, authority and fear, is not very efficient and is only temporary, but it answers the needs of a situation which can be met in no more satisfactory way.

Not every probation or parole officer need engage in the art of psychiatric social work. To begin with, a few qualified workers can deal intensively with a few carefully selected cases on probation or on parole. But, ideally, all officers who deal with offenders should appreciate the mental hygiene point of view.

Anyone who has to do with problems of human relations has an important place in the field of mental hygiene. The skilled psychiatrist is the expert; but all of us, in relation to each other, can apply the principles of mental hygiene according to our own degree of skill and understanding. The mental

hygiene attitude is not merely a matter of good will toward others. It is, in part, a matter of knowledge of a special body of fact which throws light on one's ability or inability to maintain satisfactory human relationships. It is also, in part, a matter of emotional self-development; that is, the ability to see ourselves, our own conflicts, and our own shortcomings. It is unlikely that anyone acquainted with the field of mental hygiene will be smug or feel superior to others. The mental hygienist recognizes and feels the constant temptation to exploit others in order to relieve his own emotional disturbances. He tries, more or less successfully, not to exploit others to satisfy his own emotional needs when it is the other's needs which have to be dealt with. The trained officer will keep himself out of his client's life as much as possible. He will understand that the approach to an offender's problems is through the capacities, attitudes, and values of the client and not those of the worker.

It should be clearly stated that the dynamic social case work approach is only one approach to the problems of probationers and parolees. There are other approaches which may be used for different offenders. Furthermore, none of the approaches are mutually exclusive. Lack of income or employment may be the important factor in some cases. Medical assistance may be the key in other cases. In still other cases the only effective approach left to the worker may be that of giving orders.

The dynamic relationship approach has been emphasized because it has

been least discussed in relation to the treatment of offenders.

IV

Our answer to the question, "What is expected in programs for the social treatment of the adult offender?" is two-fold. Modify the extent of social disorganization and help the offender to straighten out his own personality defects. In the long run it may be simpler and more efficient to change institutions than to struggle with succeeding generations of offenders.

The primary task of the probation and parole officer, however, is the treatment of the offender not that of reconstructing society. It does not follow, however, that the social worker must refuse to participate in social action which promises to lessen the cultural disorganization which supports criminal activities.

Knowledge of the interdependence of personality and culture is sterile unless it be used to alter both society and the individual. Criminal behavior is the response of individuals living in a specific culture. To lessen crime individuals must be given the opportunity to express themselves constructively. This means that the pattern of family and school life must be changed. This, in turn, implies the development of different standards of success, different ideas of what characterizes a "good life." This leads, necessarily, to a different philosophy of economic and political organization. Families must become economically secure so that they are adequately nourished, clothed and housed and, hence, psychologically secure. Schools must be free to give

to children the opportunities to develop themselves. They must not be used as agencies to perpetuate social values which have not proven successful for the majority of people. The government must concern itself with the basic problems of how its citizens can live dignifiedly and not merely with the problems of maintaining an industrial system which is not serving the vast majority of the people.

Conflict will always arise—conflict

in society and conflict in individual's lives. Every society will have its crimes and criminals. Our concern, however, is to minimize the incidence of crime in present society. Improvement in techniques, treatment, and personnel should be encouraged. But the limits within which progress can be made should be recognized. We should not try to do the impossible, else we shall be disappointed even if we succeed in doing our best.