

1942

Behavior Characteristics of Antisocial Recidivists

H. Birnet Hovey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

H. Birnet Hovey, Behavior Characteristics of Antisocial Recidivists, 32 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 636 (1941-1942)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

BEHAVIOR CHARACTERISTICS OF ANTISOCIAL RECIDIVISTS

H. Birnet Hovey¹

The more extreme cases of continuous criminality are often found to relate to psychopathic personalities which seem incapable of attaining a satisfactory adjustment to normal environments and which are almost invariably social liabilities. They are often designated as constitutional psychopathic inferiors. Comparatively little is known about the etiology of the condition, and general agreement on diagnosis is still lacking among psychiatrists. These inadequate individuals do not seem to fall into a category as, for example, most schizophrenics and imbeciles do. The present preliminary study was made in order to obtain additional information about the special reaction tendencies such persons are likely to have, and especially to learn what has been their behavior development from birth. The study is concerned with a determination of symptoms rather than with an evaluation of causative factors.

Selection of Material for Study

From among almost fourteen hundred Federal prisoners received by transfer to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, one hundred were selected for detailed study. Fifty of these represented some of the most extreme cases received, from the standpoint of social inadequacy during adulthood. These fifty cases were selected by the following criteria: (1) personal history data—adequate information on each must have been obtained; (2) age—over 21

years at time of last conviction; (3) intelligence—approximately average; (4) adaptation to normal group life—general inability as an adult in this regard; (5) delinquency—history of at least four misdemeanors or a former felony; (6) establishment of residence—outstanding migratory activities; (7) occupational adjustment—decidedly unstable. The group selected could generally be characterized as comprised of male prisoners most of whom had been unreliable, egotistical, arrogant, lacking in regard for the rights and feelings of others, insensitive, and who had possessed sundry other undesirable traits which were observed during imprisonment. Most of them had been diagnosed as constitutional psychopathic inferiors.

The second group of fifty cases was selected for comparison with the "inadequate" group. Every case of this group was comparable to those of the other group in terms of the first three criteria, and had the opposite, or normal, characteristics in terms of the remaining criteria; i.e. none had been charged with committing previous felonies and in no case more than three misdemeanors; all were free from marked migratory tendencies, were emotionally stable, and seemed to be reasonably well adjusted socially. The average age for this group was approximately forty years, and that for the misfit group was about thirty-four years and six months.

¹ Senior Warden's Assistant, Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, Springfield, Mo.

There was no significant difference in the proportion of each group which came from poverty stricken homes, or from homes broken by death of a parent, divorce, or separation, before our subjects became adults. There was no significant difference in the proportion of each group which attended Sunday-school during childhood. Size of family, number of siblings having died during infancy, incidence of childhood diseases, income of the father, type of neighborhood in which reared, etc., seemed similar in the backgrounds of both groups. Both groups were roughly equated in-so-far as the more obvious environmental stresses and strains are concerned.

The Data and Treatment

We were interested to know if our misfits had possessed, early in life and before adulthood was reached, significant aberrant traits of behavior which might be precursory. We also wanted to know what some of the traits might be, and how far back in the life histories they might be revealed. Historical information was obtained through interviews with individual

prisoners, from relatives, social agencies, acquaintances, etc. No unsupported statements of the prisoners were depended upon. Whenever an aberrant trait was reported by the informant it was recorded in the case. For instance, if an aunt reported that a subject had fainting spells during childhood while the mother and an older brother failed to make such a report, the subject would be recorded as having had fainting spells. Not every case history, taken by itself, can be depended upon as entirely complete and accurate, but the individual omissions are reduced in importance by virtue of the fact that one hundred cases were used, and that omissions were probably as likely to occur in either of the two groups.

After the one hundred cases were selected, approximately seventy behavior items which could be displayed from birth to manhood, were evaluated. Every one of these items was given a score weighted according to the frequency with which it occurred among the members of the maladjusted group, minus a value determined by its frequency in the other group.² The weighted score roughly indicates the

² The writer was unable to find any applicable method of weighting the traits, in terms of their significance, and using the kind of data we collected. The following formula was devised for weighting and seemed to work out fairly well from an empirical standpoint:

$$W = \frac{(Dm - Dc)^2}{Dm + Dc}$$

Where (Dm) is the percentage deviation from zero of the misfit group, and (Dc) the percentage deviation from zero of the control group. With the use of this formula, all weights for deviations of the misfit group are directly proportional to the actual deviations, so long as there is no deviation for the control group. If for instance, 25% of the misfit group possessed a given trait, and none of the control group did, the weight would turn out to be 25. However, the weight for a difference between the deviations of each of the two groups becomes less and less as the deviation from zero of the

control group increases. If the deviation of the misfits was 30% and that of the controls 20%, the weight would not be 10, but only 2; if the deviations were 100% and 90% the weight would be only about 0.5. Increasing deviations on the part of the control group have more and more effect in reducing the value of differences.

No criterion is known to the writer by which to determine whether or not the formula provides the correct rate of decrement as a function of the size of control group deviations, but one may consider the scoring with its use more representative of the data than weighting merely in terms of percentage differences. Every significant trait was given a score representing its weighted value. Step-intervals of ten were used, the score given being the number of the interval. The highest possible score for a trait or item was 10. A general trend such as occupational instability scores higher than this by combining more than one item.

TABLE I

<i>Childhood-Youth Traits</i>	<i>Weighted Scores</i>
1. Learned to walk abnormally late.....	1
2. Learned to talk abnormally late.....	3
3. Frequent night terrors during childhood.....	3
4. Failed to sleep well during childhood.....	3
5. Enuresis beyond normal age for control of it.....	4
6. Failed to grow normally.....	1
7. Convulsions during childhood.....	1
8. Poor appetite during childhood.....	1
9. Fainting spells during childhood.....	2
10. Unusual sex interest during childhood.....	1
11. Conspicuously disobedient during childhood.....	7
12. Frequent complaints of headaches during childhood.....	2
13. Frequent temper tantrums during childhood and youth.....	6
14. Markedly untruthful as a youth.....	6
15. Maladjustment to the grade school situation.....	1 to 19
16. Criminality during youth.....	3 to 12
17. Maladjustment to relatives.....	5 to 17
18. Maladjustment to other associates.....	2 to 6
19. Juvenile court appearances for difficulties other than violations of statutory codes	5
20. Upon advent of puberty, showed no special interest in girls.....	3
21. Did not engage in any kind of legitimate employment within a reasonable time after leaving school.....	5

significance of any item in relation to the other items. Some of the items were combined into more general traits for which partial scores could be given depending upon the approximate magnitude of these traits. Thirty of the items, or twenty-one of these traits turned out to be significant. The significant traits together with weighted scores assigned, are given in Table I.³

The traits considered in this study represent definite aberrant reactions which had been consummated in the lives of our subjects. No trait was considered for study which represented merely a tendency to react in a certain

way, or which would require technical skill in order to be detected in a subject. Accordingly the edipus complex, strivings for unobtainable goals, feelings of insecurity, wishful thinking, unfavorable attitudes toward parental authority, and the like were not included. Such were beyond the scope of our facilities for collecting data.

Some of the traits shown in Table I are perhaps so closely related to each other that they could have been combined into expressions for more general traits. The writer, however, was not in a position to interpret their meanings, for the most part, in terms of the

³ The separate items and partial scores for maladjustment to school were: retarded over two years in school, 1; poor school reports, 5; truancy, 5; general poor adjustment in school including poor deportment, strong dislike, etc., 8. One offense against a statutory code as youthful criminality, 5; two such offenses, 9; three or more, 12. The separate items for maladjustment to rela-

tives were: poor adjustment to siblings, 5; poor adjustment to parents or guardian, 5; ran away from home, 7. Maladjustment to other associates was broken down as follows: few or no playmates although they were available, 2; poor adjustment to playmates, 4; few or no playmates, plus poor adjustment, 6.

individuals themselves and consequently was unable so to combine them. For instance, he was unable to determine whether certain traits were expressions of psycho-motor or emotional instability or some other biological deficiency, or whether these same traits were reactions of the child to gain special attention, or were expressions of defiance, or were symptoms of poor health or laziness. Our chief concern anyway was to discover those overt reaction patterns appearing during development from childhood to young

manhood which are related to individuals who become adult misfits.

Some of the characteristics which were not significant were: unusual timidity, unusual expressions of jealousy, outstanding tendencies to lead or to follow, number of years spent in school or grade attained, unusual interest in girls upon reaching puberty.

Every one of the hundred cases was given an index score, each of which was a summation of weighted scores in the case. Table II below presents the distribution of cases for the index scores.

TABLE II

Class intervals of index scores	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
	-9	-19	-29	-39	-49	-59	-69	-79	-89	-99	-109
No. of psychopathic cases			2	1		7	13	14	4	5	4
No. of control cases	38	10	2								

Our original criteria for selecting cases pertain to certain social maladjustments of adulthood. Several additional traits which may be displayed by male adults were considered and weighted in the same manner as were the childhood-youth traits. The significant ones, together with the weighted scores assigned, are as follows:⁴ (1) Subnormal sex drive, 1 to 13; (2) marital maladjustment, 3 to 9; (3) maladjustment to other personalities, 1 to 9; (4) hypochondriacal tendencies, 2 to 7; (5) paranoid tendencies, 2 to 6; (6) never helped to support parents or guardians, 2; (7) abnormal loss of memory, 2; (8) used opiates, 2; (9)

made threats to commit suicide, 2; (10) unusual change reported in character or personality, 1; (11) disposed to spells of the blues, 1; (12) unusual interest in women, 1.

Discussion

Early traits of an anomalous nature showed up much more frequently for the maladjusted adults than for the controls. Table I presents a list of them. These psychopaths on the average started violating statutory codes when they were about sixteen years of age, while the average number of the other group was about twenty years older than this before he committed a crime.

⁴ Any combination of the following would provide a score of from one to thirteen for degree of subnormal sex "drive": never married, 1; never fell in love, 2; avoided association with women, 2; never interested in becoming married, 4; subnormal interest in women, 4. A score of two was given for hypochondriacal tendencies if the subject had the reputation of making imagi-

nary complaints or complained of nervousness; a score of three for unwarranted complaining over actual physical ailments; and if all three items were present the score would be seven. If the subject were usually suspicious of his friends the score for paranoid tendencies was two; if he were inclined to blame others for his troubles the score was four; if both, the score was six.

The maladjusted group was in general more paranoid, more hypochondriacal, less concerned with heterosexual affairs, less able to be congenial with marital mates and other persons, more susceptible to temporary "nervous break-downs," more extroverted and egotistical, etc.⁵

The study indicates some of the traits a diagnostician might look for in examining an individual who has been presenting a serious social problem. The degree of psychopathy or inadequacy present might be estimated by comparing the traits revealed by the subject with tables such as ours.

The average index score based on childhood-youth traits for the psychopathic group was found to be 71.4, and the average for the control group, 6.1. Table III shows that there is some overlapping in the two distributions. The amount of overlapping is surprisingly small, however, considering that these distributions are based on projections back into behavior peculiarities which occurred during growth of the two groups to young manhood. Even those psychopaths involved in the region of overlapping were characteristically different from the few controls with childhood-youth scores of the same magnitude. The three misfits with the

lowest scores for their group were distinctly non-aggressive. None of them ever appeared before juvenile court authorities, nor had temper tantrums, nor even ran away from home, nor were considered as incorrigible, nor had committed any offenses against statutory codes, nor had conspicuous difficulties with playmates. None of them was shown to constitute a problem case in school. All frequently complained of headaches and showed other symptoms, such as enuresis and sleeping poorly, often looked upon as indications of poor health.

The data indicate that socially inadequate individuals like the ones used in this survey have been somewhat psychopathic or inadequate since an early age. Some of the behavior anomalies of children which we found associated with adult antisocial personalities, are often looked upon as short-comings to be outgrown. Traits such as the following may be so misinterpreted: prolonged enuresis, failure to talk until an age so late that the symptom is quite out of keeping with the child's own general behavior development, frequent night terrors, frequent temper tantrums, frequent complaints of headaches, nervousness, incorrigibility, poor school adjustment, deceitfulness, poor adjust-

⁵ It is somewhat surprising that the members of the socially inadequate group on the whole were practically no more inclined than were those of the other group to drink, or "chase women," or refrain from going to church. Only 12% of the controls were abstainers from liquor, whereas 20% of the misfits were. The misfits who did use liquor were, however, slightly more inclined to use them to excess—40% as compared to 32% for the controls. Less than one-half of either group were church-goers, the tendency not being significantly greater in either group. Forty-two percent of the misfits were found to have shown distinctly less interest in women than does the average man, whereas only 2% of the other group lacked such interest, and in har-

mony with this, 34% more of the misfits than of the controls had been in the habit of avoiding association with women. While only 14% of the controls, upon the advent of puberty, displayed no interest in girls, 64% of the misfits showed no interest in them, as far as relatives could tell. This apparent lack of interest might have resulted from sexual conflicts, diversion of interest, lack of sexual "drive," or some other factor or group of factors, but the writer doubts that bashfulness or timidity was responsible in view of the fact that the misfits had been more aggressive in general throughout their lives than had the controls. These misfits perhaps are somewhat analogous to schizophrenic personalities insofar as subnormal heterosexual activity is concerned.

ment to others, and later a lack of sense of responsibility as shown by failure to work upon leaving school, etc. If such shortcomings summate in an adolescent they are perhaps definite forerunners of future inadequacy, psychopathy and criminality. Though specific symptoms may be outgrown, they always manifest themselves in antisocial reactions.

The problem has not been settled as to whether or not such behavior anomalies are inherited, but from the practical standpoint of dealing with these aberrant individuals, it apparently does not matter much.⁶ There seems to be no convincing evidence shown in literature on the subject, that psychopathic individuals of the kind being discussed here are curable by any method of treatment known at present—even treatment applied before adulthood is reached.⁷ The histories of many of our

cases reveal that constructive methods of treatment of various kinds had been tried out which might have been helpful, but did not rectify the condition.

The recent and comprehensive study by Healy and Bronner of young delinquents who were paired with their respective non-delinquent twins and siblings of the same sex revealed consistent features in the lives of the delinquent components. The features may be generalized in terms of emotional discomfort. The delinquents were deprived of a normal share of affectional relationships and feelings of security, and in contrast to the controls, possessed feelings of inferiority, rejection and thwartings of their personal relationships. Such features as these, they found, led to delinquency.⁸ One or both parents might have developed, for instance, a dislike for a twin as a result

⁶ In raising the question of hereditary types of antisocial personalities, Rosanoff reveals, in his latest book, considerable evidence pointing toward an answer in the affirmative. He devotes a chapter to discussing evidence, one of the strongest being that if a twin is antisocial, the other twin is more than twice as likely also to be antisocial if the twinship is monozygotic rather than dizygotic. (From Rosanoff, Aaron J., "Manual of Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene," John Wiley & Sons, Inc., N. Y., 1938, P. 612.)

Development of temperamental traits, independent of educational factors, can be explicitly demonstrated in animals. Calvin P. Stone reared under identical laboratory conditions strains of wild and domestic rats and crossbreeds between the two strains. Extensive and well controlled tests for savageness and wildness were made after the rats matured. The test averages for each group had differences of statistical significance. There was no overlapping in degrees of wildness and savageness from one of the pure-bred groups to the other. He went further and transferred fertilized eggs of wild rats to the uterine tubes of a domestic albino, the offspring then being reared with other domestic rats. Nevertheless, the experimental animals developed the temperamental traits of their forebears. Stone points out that it is relatively easy to vary certain temperamental traits by selective breeding; that scientific manuals setting forth the differential features of various breeds of different domestic animals usually cite characteristic be-

havior differences. (From Murchison, Carl, "Handbook of General Experimental Psychology," Clark Univ. Press, Worcester, Mass., 1934. Ch. 8.)

⁷ Although no effective methods for normalizing psychopaths have so far been demonstrated, there is considerable promise in the offing, with further experimentation, for adjusting them to sojourns in walled institutions where they at present provide some of the most perplexing annoyances to good administration. At the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners many of them have responded well to rigid discipline in which little judgment is required of them, where isolation from the inmate population and restriction of privileges is practically certain for failures. Such treatment has turned out to be more fruitful when done on a psychotherapeutic basis and without connotations of punishment. Occupation under strict supervision, and rewards for improvement in behavior have shown themselves to be essential. Individual attention to their personal problems has proven helpful so long as unrelenting firmness tempered with fairness is used. Some of them respond favorably to no methods of treatment so far tried out and must be controlled by continued segregation. Obstructions to a constructive program seem to be the granting of unearned privileges, coddling, undue attention, allowing opportunities for them to become conspicuous.

⁸ Healy & Bronner, "New Light on Delinquency and Its Treatment," Yale University Press, 1937.

of its unresponsiveness to solicitations. One might wonder if the failure of a few of these delinquents to gain affection and other benefits assuring emotional comfort, were not due to behavior anomalies on their part which subtly incited unfavorable reactions on the part of others such as parents, thus setting up a vicious cycle.

We see that there is promise that antisocial personality or psychopathy can be roughly measured quantitatively, and that cases may be diagnosed before adulthood is reached. If a large number of cases both selected and unselected were studied, statistical treatment of the data might provide fairly accurate tables as aids in evaluating the degree of psychopathic tendency in any given case. The writer plans further to study early aberrant traits of behavior which may be precursory, by using the cases of all male adults routinely admitted to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners. He plans to give to all the cases an index score based upon childhood-youth traits found to be significant, and then to ascertain how they have turned out as adults. Such a study should throw more light on the question of recovery or social adjustment of those individuals with early aberrant traits. It should produce data of value in the selection of delinquents for probation, reformatory and special educational treatment, parole, indefinite incarceration, psychiatric treatment, etc.

Psychopathic inferiority itself should be further analyzed in order to learn more about it, what the various symptoms are, to learn if certain symptoms

and behavior patterns tend to cluster into natural groupings indicating psychopathic categories for these incivistic cases. The writer hopes to carry out this program.

Summary

Two groups of adult male prisoners, one comprised of maladjusted recidivists, and the other of relatively well adjusted first offenders, were compared for aberrant behavior traits revealed during the life histories. The conclusions follow:

1. Recidivists who are occupationally unstable to a marked extent, and who have outstanding migratory tendencies, are quite likely to have additional personality or character inadequacies which make them nuisances or menaces to the welfare of others and to the peace of the community.

2. The psychopaths studied seem to have passed through a relatively characteristic development from infancy; a development carrying with it expressions of anomalous behavior patterns lacking desirability from a social standpoint; patterns which have the semblance of social unresponsiveness.

3. For the purpose of diagnosis or of evaluating the degree of psychopathic tendency, an index score might be computed from weights assigned to individual behavior traits of an anomalous nature. Such index scores might also be used in prognosis.

4. Social workers, probation officers and officials of penal institutions can probably achieve more valuable results if they take the trouble to have their problem cases studied for psychopathic conditions and handle them accordingly.