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FAMILY TENSION, BASIC CAUSE OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

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In 1944 Columbia University, supported by funds from the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, sponsored a research project to investigate the psychosomatic factors in antisocial behavior. The project lasted four years and revealed that when criminal tendencies exist, unwholesome conditions within the home and intense physical disturbances among the family members invariably occur also.

Psychosomatic Factors

Criminal acts, subjectively speaking, indicate an unusual amount of aggressiveness and hostility which is common to warped minds. Because such attitudes usually reflect discord between children and parents, we investigated not only offenders but members of their families as well. Whenever we found psychosomatic disorders, we also encountered distorted emotional patterns in the home, such as over-protection, dominance, rivalry and defense mechanisms. Or if we found the latter, physical symptoms soon showed themselves, if they hadn't already appeared. The one went with the other, inseparably, and often immediately apparent. It was our purpose to find the relation between emotional attitudes and the existence of criminal behavior. As far as we know, this is the first time that this method, with confirmation of Rorschach tests, has been used in such an investigation.

In this undertaking, we worked with 100 offenders and their families and also with 100 non-offenders, or control groups. The latter were abnormal and in need of treatment, but they had committed no crimes.

We used no so-called normal persons in making the comparison, because unfortunately it is not easy to collect such people, inasmuch as no one likes to be examined when it is unnecessary. Beyond this, if we had been able to group together persons usually considered normal, in the final analysis they might turn out to be nothing of the kind.

The offenders we examined were embezzlers, armed robbers, thieves, murderers, exhibitionists, and kleptomaniacs. They were referred to us while they were on probation and on parole from prison. Others were from agencies or direct from private physicians.

It is a common misconception even today that those who commit crimes are arrogantly breaking the law and deriving a fiendish pleasure from getting away with it. Many people in discussing an offender will assume a hostility not too far removed from the original hostility of the person committing the crime. Thus the old idea of revenge is continued and the possibility of understanding the criminal is kept at a minimum.

Perhaps it is even more unfortunate that a vast number of people who deal with criminals believe offenders act out their hostilities and thereby get rid of them entirely.

In fact crime is far from being so simple. Actually, too, those who commit crimes are much to be pitied rather than scorned. Thus the idea of "Pity them, for they know not what they do" can, I think, be applied to the man who commits crime, and to us as well, when we give him more of what may have led him into crime, and then, after a while, turn him loose to commit another, because he is by that time possibly a little sicker than he was before.

My purpose is not to outline remedies for our existing penal system. Such an undertaking would take much more space than I am allowed, and require many people working in many professions with many kinds of experience. It would take the man of scientific theory; that is, the criminologist. It would take the penologist who has actually worked within prison walls; architects, humanitarians and statisticians. And it would take, probably most of all, understanding. It is with the hope of giving a little of this foundation that I am now presenting some of our findings.

In psychiatry we base much of our knowledge upon our discoveries from psychological sessions with patients and the revelations that are made to us within them, together with neurological findings. In research projects of the kind we engaged in, we do the same thing, but we have better opportunity to make comparisons and produce results which are more conclusive insofar as tangible evidence is concerned.

Family Tension

In this study, for instance, it became clear that there was much more family tension in the 100 offenders we examined,

together with their families, than existed in the control group. This was not so easy to detect, for the defenses were heavier and harder to break through. After a while, though, the pieces fell into place in one case after another . . . a mother dominated the family household and/or a father drank, one child was preferred to another, and perhaps the next one wasn't wanted at all.

Oftentimes tension wasn't evident within a household but existed as a strong undercurrent which colored the behavior of the family members. Such was the case with Mr. and Mrs. N. and their little girl, G. This was an exceptionally bright family on a purely intellectual level. The mother and father had no idea that their emotions were infantile and that they were really incapable of loving in an adult fashion; both were fixated, both conflicted. They lived as husband and wife, enjoyed many of the same interests and were looked upon by others as one of the happiest couples in the community. Meanwhile they so successfully buried their inner loathing for each other that they were hardly even aware of it. But their daughter, G., who was only eight years old, sensed it, largely because she was the product of hate, not love. She resented the way both parents gently but firmly ordered her about, and that oftentimes their ideas about G's conduct were very contradictory. In such instances, both parents would intellectualize the difference, but nonetheless hold tenaciously on to their point, the ultimate issue being who would win the argument, not what was best for G.

G. began to be a nuisance in school. She wouldn't do her work, and she annoyed the other children when they tried to do theirs. She played truant often and even wrote obscene words in the girls' room. She was able to proceed in her grades only because she had an above average intelligence. Then one day a teacher discovered it was she who had taken several white mice to school and put them in the various teachers' desk drawers. The principal of the school decided to expel her, but her parents asked if she might be sent to a psychiatrist first. This was agreed upon. Psychiatric examination disclosed that G. was reacting severely to an unhappy home situation. She felt rejected, was hostile and depressed, which necessitated psychotherapy. G's parents were therefore consulted and soon afterwards put under treatment. G. was sent back to school. Her mother underwent treatment for two years, and the father for some time more than that. In learning about their inner selves, the mother lost her antagonism towards men, who had until then represented her demanding father, and G's father dis-

covered it was not necessary for him to outdo everyone simply because he had been made to feel ineffectual as a child.

As a result of this new found self-knowledge, Mr. and Mrs. N. were able to accept themselves and each other, and their daughter in time became one of the leading scholars in the school.

Rorschach Tests

The Rorschachs we took of 31 offenders showed much hostility and aggression and usually sexual or some other kind of conflict as a result of a tense family situation which had not been checked at an early age as in the case of G. Having been permitted to grow, the resentments had become deep and often so devious that the offenders seldom had any idea of the root of their real unhappiness. For it is natural to suppress that which one doesn't like to face, such as contempt for a parent or jealousy of a sister. But emotions such as these, kept in check long enough, can eventually cause illness, and crime as well.

Sigmund Freud developed the concept that the origin of neuroses and psychoses lies within psychosexual conflicts in childhood. Our investigations indicate that criminal behavior, coupled with psychosomatic disturbances, can grow out of early emotional deprivations, not necessarily always connected with the psychosexual type of conflict.

There was one lad of 20 included in our study, who was taken to a psychiatrist because he had stolen a typewriter, sold it, and with the profits had bought many books which he made no attempt to read. As the crime shows, he was not really living in this world. He had, in fact, a very peculiar outlook upon the world as well-adjusted people know it. He thought he should not look for work, but that it should come to him. He wanted to be better and more outstanding than others, and yet he did nothing whatever to bring this situation about. He was ill constantly with infected teeth and still he would not go to the dentist because the dentist might hurt him; but he stayed up night after night administering drugs to his sick mouth because the pain permitted him no sleep. He had the flu on the average of twelve times a year.

Discussion with the boy showed a strong resistance to any reference to his father, except for occasional mention of what an extraordinary person he was. He loved his mother dearly, and as time disclosed, she babied him and pampered him so that it was hardly any wonder he didn't outdo himself to get a job.

The father in this case turned out to be the very real fundamental difficulty in the boy's life. He was a human dynamo, and he enjoyed telling of his accomplishments and then teasing his son for not doing more with the intelligence he must have inherited from his father. All of this made the boy feel so inferior that he felt he could never equal the example set before him, hence he did nothing to escape failure. His mother encouraged his neurotic outlook, and therefore the boy lived in a world of his own making, because there was less pain there.

Both his mother and his father had to learn their mistakes and to change their attitudes. The boy had to be made to understand why he was behaving in such an odd fashion; had to be made to feel he was a person in his own right. The problem rested much more with the mother and father than it did with the boy, for they really created his trouble.

Here, then, was a boy with a schizoid make-up, who was physically ill all the time and who also committed a crime. He was in conflict about sex, as with practically everything else, but his condition was by no means centered around this factor.

Parents' Attitudes

Another often overlooked feature we found in our study was that a parent's own undeveloped attitude about sex can twist a child's outlook without either parent or child being aware of what is taking place. This would seem not to be a reversal of the Freudian concept, but an addition to it, because, besides or aside from there being a transmission of destructive parental thought and reaction thereto, there would seem to be a kind of contagion of undevelopment that goes beyond identification. In other words, when we found indications of incest or desire for it, invariably it was a reciprocal two-way state of mind, unconscious though it may have been.

In the case of one man who attempted to rape his mother, for example, it was discovered that she was unknowingly being most seductive to him.

Then there was the tragic case of a beautiful young woman who at the time was 22 and looked about 33. At first she seemed very pleasant, charming and eager to please. She was sent to us because she had stolen various articles which added up to quite a few thousands of dollars. It did not seem to worry her. Her father had paid off the amount, and she would in time pay him back. But she was earning only \$30.00 a week and could spare him but \$5.00 every pay day. She also seemed undisturbed over the fact that she had given birth to an illegitimate

mulatto child, who was scorned by her father and the object of great concern to her mother.

After a few sessions with this young woman, it was revealed that C. had a great distaste for all men. She liked to tantalize them, to hurt them and if possible to destroy them. When asked about her father she disclosed an unqualified dislike for him, claiming he always ruled her and, in fact, in saying so unwittingly said: "he has ruined . . . ruled my life".

After awhile C's father was consulted. He wanted to do everything in his power to make his daughter happy. So much so that he was sexually interested in her and did not know it. Therefore he dominated the girl, discouraged any interest she showed in the young men who courted her and did all within his power to keep himself near to her. She repaid him by bringing an illegitimate half-breed child into the house, and then by stealing.

Treatment of C's father revealed that he was an emotionally immature person who was afraid to go outside of the blood ties in seeking a mate, and that he had in fact also been strongly attached to his mother.

One apparent answer then is that parents cannot expect their children to be like adults and act like them when the parents themselves are still functioning on an immature level, for they are a mirror to the children they bring up, giving them their first ideas, developing in them their first reactions. If the parents' view of the world is distorted, they can hardly expect the children's to be entirely wholesome. Neither can they, if the children become mentally ill or commit a crime, absolve themselves of responsibility and blame it on "the company they keep". For parents, or those who act as such, are a child's first company, that from which his personality is built or destroyed. And if the company he takes up with later on is of the wrong sort, then it can only be because his parents failed him in the beginning.

Statistical Proof

In our project, of the 29 members of offenders' families who submitted to Rorschach and other psychological tests, all were suffering from mental disturbances of various degrees. Some of these families on the surface were friendly, cooperative, and showed deep concern over the offenders' difficulties. When we went into the situations thoroughly we found hostility and resentment among the family members.

Examination also revealed a high incidence of psychosomatic disorders among offenders and their families as opposed to those found in the control group.

In a cross-section of 60 offenders and 60 non-offenders, just a few of the results were as follows:

Diseases of the gastro-intestinal tract appeared in 55 per cent of the offenders and 45 per cent of the non-offenders. Skin afflictions occurred in 17 per cent of the offenders and five per cent of the non-offenders. And, whereas 20 per cent of the offenders were prone to accidents, this was true of only 10 per cent of those who kept within the bounds of the law.

Psychosomatic disorders are recognized as a turning in of hostility and repressed anger resulting in physical symptoms. It would seem then that in the offender against society you have, in the large majority of cases anyway, the utmost in a basic unhappiness, a basic conflict that more often than not entirely escapes the offender. When he seems to act out his hostilities and thereby rid himself of them, he does so only for the moment, a release the neurotic and psychotic does not have, because they are too inhibited. However, with each new crime the offender commits he builds up a thicker barrier between himself and society, making it the more difficult for him to live in this world. In addition, he also has going on within him those temptations and desires to which he does not and cannot give expression. Therefore he has the fantasies that he acts out, the punishment received therefore and still other fantasies tormenting him.

There is an exception to this, to be found in the genuine psychopath. Having never been able to identify himself with a mother or father, he chose at an early age to live by his own rules, and having never developed any conscience because he had no one to imitate, he always did what he pleased and felt no guilt for it. There are such few people in existence that I mention them only for accuracy's sake, and then go on to maintain that other offenders suffer from acute anxieties arising out of deeply rooted conflicts.

Roots of Rebellion

The first surroundings to which a child is subjected tend to set up reactions within him that will remain throughout life. This is because the child is sensitive and as yet without formed reaction patterns, or pattern of behavior. Hence anything extreme is bound to have a profound effect upon him, just as a dog who was beaten as a puppy will often cringe in the corner

in expectation of more of the same. Thus, if a child is subjected to emotional shock such as rejection, he may go on through life looking for shock or for personal rejection. Or, if the situation in which he lives in the beginning starts him off with feelings of insecurity and unrest because of bickerings and quarrels, these may make him tense up, react internally with physical illness, retire partly into a dream world, and in time break out with a crime in pure revolt against the injustice done him.

If a child is overprotected and overindulged in every whim, he will resent it because of the inherent desire within us all to be independent. He may therefore develop such resentment over his dependence that he will commit crime in order to assert himself. Or, he may do so when his means of support and care are taken from him because he considers it an injustice to have to stand on his own. If a child is made to feel unimportant and unwanted, he may in time break the law to call attention to himself, to punish his parents for their neglect and to hurt himself for his own guilt in disliking his parents' behavior.

We all have criminalistic tendencies, and they may be made more acute at certain times. A child, particularly, living in a family where the emotional tension is acute and continuous, will become sensitized to crime. He begins to repress his painful memories about his childhood deprivations with the result that there arises within him a kind of anxiety-tinged, free-floating aggression. When his conscience (or superego) has not been sufficiently developed he can commit a crime under the pressure of precipitating factors.

Such sensitization takes place most frequently when emotional tension is present in the family for such an unhappy setting is a breeding ground for crime. We have found that the *emotional relationship* between parents, or between brothers and sisters instigates criminalistic activities more often than the economic or social position of the family. It may then be that the characteristic difference between the criminal and non-criminal has its origin in the degree and type of family tension, as it affects the individual.

Personality make-up is also of importance, not necessarily in terms of heredity, but of constitutional predisposition toward violence instead of, say, to develop a psychosis. That is to say, a person may not inherit the same weakness as a parent, but he may develop a tendency to go in the same direction, all other things being equal.

Outside Factors

Then there is the factor of education. Offenders often come from the lowest strata of society, and there is a curious lack of inhibition in offenders which suggests a lack of education. Yet the offenders in our group were of extremely mixed backgrounds. Some were from very solid and substantial homes and of parents who were teachers, officials and leaders in society. Others were from poor homes and of people who lived in constant fear of complete poverty. Some of the offenders had little actual schooling, and others went through college.

So although formal education seems to answer little, it does seem true that crime may occasionally have its roots in the *home* education. Those cases in which this is most evident have to do with a conflicting form of upbringing in which at least one of the parents is loose and immoral and yet expects the children to be without even normal desires. This is obviously another form of family tension, but it relates to education, too. In such a home a father may live very corruptly and the whole neighborhood may know it, and yet he will tell his son that a boy will go insane if he touches his genitals. The mother may be amoral in her behavior and nonetheless tell her daughter she will become pregnant if a boy kisses her. For a child to have such conflicting outlooks as this may cause him to become so bottled up with anxiety and repressions that a crime will ensue as a result of natural human desires seeking an outlet. This kind of situation—criminality growing out of the asocial home—is possibly one of our greatest battles, and if we do not try to control it when it exists by some sort of enforced segregation of child and parent, it is a problem that is liable to have no end.

There has been much written lately to the effect that children must have more and better recreation if there would be less crime. This is all very well, and I am certainly for healthy activity for youngsters. But the core of crime is within the atmosphere of the home. If we overlook this fact and go on to other things, we are neglecting the real issue and simply missing the fundamental one, for all else is superficial. It is within the home that patterns are formed, and tough gangs notwithstanding, there would be no need of such gangs if relations at home were sufficient and proper guidance were provided.

The insidious factor insofar as tough gangs is concerned is that if there are many homes which provide no emotional security, the boys of the neighborhood will flock together, form a gang and assume a toughness which will act as a shield for them. This then may grow to such an extent that other children

who have a half-way decent situation within the home may join up even reluctantly for fear of otherwise being considered a weakling. This, then, is another battle, and a difficult one: the existence of mob reaction to a leader who has developed a false strength through aggression, as for instance the extreme examples of Hitler and Mussolini. Once again, the source, the home, must be reached early before the pattern is so well established that it is difficult if not impossible to break it up. This is not so difficult as it may sound. For just as a man does not become an offender all on his own, so does he not become an offender all at once.

Early Signs

There are early signs of a budding criminal which should be looked for by parents and in the schools. When a child shows an unusual amount of protest to any kind of authority or suggestion, when he is constantly speeded up whether he works or plays, when he plays truant often, he is indirectly expressing hostility. And it is extreme hostility that we find to such an overwhelming extent in the man who commits crime. Thus if it can be discovered and looked into early enough, the next step, crime, may be brought under our control. If this cannot be done with what general knowledge is before the public, then children must be sent to clinics provided for these things. Parents must also go there, inasmuch as it is adults, who, usually unknowingly and certainly without malicious intent, create the tendency within the children to commit crime.

With those families who refuse to look into their own situation, who refuse to acknowledge their mistakes and thereby continue to make more of the same, there should be provisions within the law that children growing out of these homes should be taken from their parents and placed elsewhere, preferably in a healthy normal atmosphere such as a good foster home. For with help in understanding themselves, children can break up destructive patterns very readily. This understanding, together with the emotional security of a home where a child feels wanted, is undoubtedly more distinct assurance of a good solid citizen than that growing out of many another so-called good home.

In illustration of this, there was a man of 50 who started to commit crime when he was forty-five and remained undiscovered for five years. He had been embezzling many thousands of dollars from the company in which he had an excellent and high-paying position. He was taking the money to give to a woman other than his wife. Examination revealed that the woman was

older than his wife and not nearly so attractive. But she mothered him within the office, and by an unconscious regression, he did all within his power to have her continue this, inasmuch as his own mother had preferred his little brother to him. This man never had intimate relations with this new-found substitute mother, nor did he understand his feelings about her until he underwent psychiatric treatment.

Economics

There are a few questions that are frequently asked in regard to our findings that family tension is the basic cause of criminal behavior. The first has to do with economics. It is reasonable to assume, intellectually speaking, that when one is without what is necessary for subsistence and cannot get it, he will simply take it for himself and his loved ones. This is instinctive, and it has to do with self-preservation; therefore there is a measure of truth in it. But it is only a measure, for with a good emotional stability and a proper orientation toward the laws of society and the rights of others, a person will take any kind of job, any kind of relief and any deprivation and humiliation before he will turn to theft. And extremes in this connection are not necessary in this day and age. We make provisions so that they needn't be.

A case in point was one described to us as theft growing out of poverty. Upon investigation, it turned out that the young man in question took things because he had been given to understand at an early age that the world owed him a living. When his father died, his mother sought relief and never made the slightest attempt to work. Therefore the boy became used to the idea that he should receive things without effort. Actually, he probably would have followed his mother's pattern, but there was a complication here. The mother showered her attention upon his sister, so he stole money (an artificial substitute for love) rather than go on relief in order to punish his mother for her neglect of him, and himself too, for resenting her so deeply.

Another somewhat frequent question is, why is it that one boy will be a model son and another will become a hardened criminal. Once more, it is an unbalance within the home. When a child does not receive sufficient attention, he often feigns illness, for which he will have to be well-treated. For the same reason, though usually unconscious, one boy will behave badly to receive the attention his brother receives by being a good boy. Besides this, such a child will often commit crime in a spirit of pure re-

bellion. With the crime and whatever benefit is gained thereby comes a feeling of power unknown before because the model brother has caused him to feel inferior. With each new crime comes more of a feeling of power, until a false sense of security is built up within the slighted child until, in all his toughness, all his daring and boldness, he is quite a person . . . until, that is, he is caught up with, punished, and again slighted in the eyes of society. These are to him the eyes of his mother all over again, so the hostility grows and so does the spirit of getting even, so that rather than benefitting, he commits crime again because the behavior has not been understood. The pattern has not been broken up.

Still another question that is often asked is—what about intellect? As has already been established, people of good intellect often commit crime, because of twisted emotions and therefore points of view. The outstanding way in which the argument of intellect may make a difference is that a good knowledge of the rules of society, learned often and learned well, is apt to strengthen one's superego, or conscience, so that the primitive instincts which are in all of us are kept in check through fear if nothing else. Thus too the home in which there is no effort made to teach a child what it must or must not do will naturally produce a person to whom the law means little. But this problem is basically one and the same as the one mentioned of criminality growing out of the asocial home. Because it stands to reason that other types of homes at least make an effort, even if the wrong kind, to develop good citizens out of their children.

Over all, especially beneath all, because it is seldom apparent, is the overwhelming importance of the existence of family tension. In the face of this factor, any other cause and any other maladjustment are singularly unimportant. By the same token, any other treatment than that which takes the problem of the entire family in account, is bound to be perfunctory.

Research Results

Within our project we had absolute proof of this, up to the very end. There were certain obstacles, of course, these being the resistance one always encounters in such matters. All of the 80 offenders were mentally disturbed and all originally said they wanted help, but after a few interviews some of them began to drop out, giving one or another excuse for doing so. Seventy-five had the courage to face their own inadequacies and failures. Of these, some had been completely rejected by their families

and therefore had to start over again on their own, which was not easy but not impossible. Those 75 who cooperated were seen one, two or three times a week from one-half year up to two years and some of them are now under private treatment. All of them have received help, some of them more than others. But it is in each case the changing of the *emotional* attitudes within the family group or of the environment itself that has made the difference, together of course with the offender's understanding of himself in relation to the condition under which he grew up.

Crime Prevention

What it means, then, is that we must develop a new general and mandatory treatment for the offender, one which will first of all probe into the emotional difficulties which have caused him to turn to crime as an outlet, and second will discover the cause or causes within the home. This will mean treatment not only for the offender, but for parents, close relatives, foster parents and perhaps wives and husbands.

With such a method of treatment as this as an accepted foundation, the next step would be towards the offender's comprehension of his entire situation, and suggestion to replace the original fears and hostilities with constructive outlooks and forms of behavior, until a kind of character building takes place.

When no treatment of the causative factors is possible—those parents and situations which cannot and will not be changed—then the offender, upon release from treatment, should by law be placed elsewhere.

Then too, there should be classes for parents which will give constructive insight into human behavior, suggestions as to what the needs of children are, and question and answer periods which will deal with special cases.

There should be a family court, possibly outside the jurisdiction of the law, which will put on psychological trial all the members of the family to discover who the offending member or members may be. These persons in turn then should be given no reprimands, but rather insight and understanding of themselves. This, because parents and others who bring up children today cannot be held responsible for what they do. There is not as yet enough knowledge of human behavior. There is not enough comprehension that crime is an expression of individual human emotions, just as is true with the psychotic person, the neurotic one, and the arthritic.

When, perhaps twenty years from today, all this is taught in the schools as it should be and the world is as conscious of the evils of family tension as it is of the day's weather, then the responsible parents may themselves be punished for their children's crimes. Until that day comes, it is hoped that we will not go on functioning in an innocent ignorance which first of all creates the sickness known as crime, and then punishes those afflicted with the disease. Measures should therefore be taken to prevent these most dreadful of all crimes: the tension that causes criminal activity and the punishment of the victims of such indignity.