

1950

Abrahamsen's Theory of the Etiology of Criminal Acts

Jerome E. Bates

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

Jerome E. Bates, Abrahamsen's Theory of the Etiology of Criminal Acts, 40 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 471 (1949-1950)

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.

ABRAHAMSEN'S THEORY OF THE ETIOLOGY OF CRIMINAL ACTS

Jerome E. Bates

The author is an Assistant Field Consultant for the New York City Youth Board. He was formerly Superintendent of the Richmond County Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Staten Island, N. Y. His background includes service as probation officer in the New York Court of General Sessions, psychological internship in the New York City Reformatory and psychological research with Unit No. 1, U. S. A. A. F.

The article that follows has been read, edited and approved by Dr. David Abrahamson who is now in the midst of a large project for the State of New York dealing with the problem of sex offenders.—EDITOR.

The original statement of Abrahamson's theory is to be found in his book¹ where he shows a great grasp and appreciation of the social and cultural factors involved in criminal behavior.²

The interest of society in the reasons for anti-social behavior is of recent origin. Formerly society was mainly concerned with the apprehension and punishment of the criminal. Interest has now shifted from the fact of crime to the motivations behind criminal acts. The rise, especially within the last twenty-five years, in the efficiency of city, state and federal departments of probation and parole reflects this rising interest.

Just as society depends upon the individual so does the individual have certain expectations and anticipations with regard to society. The individual also has a world of reality which is unique to him and colored by his own consciousness which he has the ability to develop apart from what may be called "the real world." This process, this duality of realities, frequently results in the commission of acts which are not clearly understood by the actor. It is now well recognized that emotional considerations color the operation of intellectual processes and even interfere with them. Every deed has a secret motivation. There may be several motives operating, of which only one may be evident to consciousness. These processes are, of course, identical for anti-social as well as social behavior. The criminal is just as often unaware of the true motives for his action as is the ordinary person. To the layman, there seems to be no connection between the criminal and his crime. This becomes evident when one discusses a crime with the criminal's relatives. To cover their shock and confusion at the arrest of their kin they usually offer some rationalization or half-truth to explain his behavior, such as: "He must be crazy," "evil companions," "he needed money," etc.

The professionally trained worker interviews the offender and makes a complete psychiatric and social investigation with

¹ "Crime and the Human Mind", New York, 1943.

² Since 1944 Abrahamson has been a Research Associate in Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University.

the aim of answering the following questions: "Why did the defendant commit the Act?" "What personal needs and urges in him were satisfied by its commission?" Finally, "What steps need to be taken to adjust the defendant's psychological disequilibrium and also satisfy social demands for protection against his possible future aggressions?"

In seeking answers to these questions it should be kept in mind that the individual is strongly affected by his social milieu and is conditioned by all his experiences, past and present. These experiences, particularly those which were charged with painful emotion and have since been repressed, are of especial importance in understanding criminotic or neurotic motivations. In understanding criminality we must keep in mind the fact that criminality and neurosis are to be considered as two sides of the same coin. One difference between the neurotic person and the offender is that a neurotic person suffers out his past experiences whereas the offender *acts* out his difficulties. It should, however, be kept in mind that there are also criminals who suffer and suffer deeply, particularly because of their guilt feelings, which in many instances may be one of the reasons why a criminal commits his crime. People whose behavior is more conditioned by their inner conflicts than by their material circumstances are more numerous than is generally realized. Extensive statistics are not available as to this type of person, but lack of statistics does not preclude the assumption of their numerous existence. Any person professionally trained in psychology and related fields meets them daily, socially and otherwise, in surprising numbers.

Efforts to fix the etiology of criminal behavior in such social factors as "the broken home," "habits of thought," "incompetent or indifferent parents," "evil associates," "inadequate supervision," etc., have met with failure. Despite grandiose claims by many investigators no piece of research has as yet adequately demonstrated that criminal behavior is due primarily to the operation of one or more of the above social conditions or of others that could be mentioned. Each criminal is unique despite surface similarities with other offenders.

Instead of talking about the influence of this and that factor, the broken home and so forth, I prefer to examine the offender's past for evidence of what I call "childhood emotional deprivation." In this manner we can account for the existence of those criminals (and normal persons) who had a broken home or what not, yet suffered no real emotional deprivation as they found adequate or compensatory satisfaction elsewhere.

If we agree with Miller *et al.*, that "frustration leads to aggression," then we can at least begin to understand the criminal act. Emotional deprivation, with its subsequent feelings of frustration and consequent aggressive reaction, if continued over a long enough period of time, may lead to anti-social behavior as a means of satisfying ego demands. The fact that a given person becomes a neurotic rather than a criminal depends, I think, upon the development in him of sufficient super-ego (conscience) by parents or others at the time he is suffering from childhood emotional deprivation.

A sudden loss of a job, a disappointment in sexual adjustment and numerous other precipitating factors acting upon a person predisposed to aggression because of emotional deprivation, may produce a criminal act. Few people turn to crime overnight. Careful and detailed psychological analysis of the offender and his social constellation usually produces evidence that he gradually became "sensitized to criminal activities," as Abrahamsen puts it, over a long period of time. At the same time one must remember that we all have criminal tendencies and the fact that we do not act on them depends on our entire psychological adjustment to our fellows and their property.

As time goes on and the sensitized person begins to repress the memory of his childhood deprivations, there arises a chronic feeling of anxiety-tinged, free-floating aggression. In the absence of restricting super-ego factors this person is the potential criminal who commits an overt criminal act under pressure of one or more initiating events. After the pattern of criminal behavior is set and reinforced by repetition, the criminal thus "has receptive traits in his personality which produce a criminal response."³

What, then, is the explanation of the criminal act? According to Abrahamsen, "Crime is a product of the individual's tendencies and the situation of the moment interacting with his mental resistance. Letting 'C' stand for crime, 'T' for tendencies, 'S' for situation, and 'R' for resistance, we derive the following formula:"⁴
$$C = \frac{T + S}{R}$$

Abrahamsen points out that the "T" factor is not simply "aggressive tendencies" since they are present in all men. "T" also refers to aggressive inclinations of an indirect nature; for instance, projections, rebellious hostility towards anyone, protest reactions, or excessive motor activity. A criminal act

³ Abrahamsen, David, M.D.: *Conquering Crime, Federal Probation*, Oct. 1947, p. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 35.

does not take place solely because of the release of repressed aggression, but may occur also because the offender has built up a defense of aggression which is expressed tangentially by projections, rejection of authority, protest reactions, etc.

Several investigations have disclosed that passivity often lies behind an act of criminal aggression, and might be regarded as being of an oral nature.⁵ Frequently, therefore, it is not the offender's aggression which is responsible for his act, but an inner core of passivity. "This indirect aggression which harbors feelings of anxiety and insecurity, being related to the pregenital period, may show how deep-seated are the emotional elements. The main characteristic of aggressive action is that it has a main potentiality, that it is unacceptable and, therefore, often repressed by the ego, and that when aggressive action takes place it is frequently not understood by the individual." Workers in the correctional field who are aware of these mechanisms are, therefore, in a better position to understand the shame, confusion, and panic reaction displayed by some first offenders following their arrest.

"S," the situation, is an indeterminate factor in mobilizing the criminal act. As each person has a unique psychological make-up, it follows that only he can achieve a particular aim in a given environment.

According to Abrahamsen, personality reactions in criminals are by nature comparable to those found in a disease.⁶ He also claims that a higher incidence of psychosomatic disorders is to be found in the family constellation of the offender than in the family members of psychotic or neurotic patients.⁷ In discussing tension within the family of an offender, the author claims that the tension is quite different from that found in the family of a neurotic.⁸ It has been my experience to find that the hostility in the family constellation of offenders is more intense *in degree* than that found in the background of neurotics. It is also less masked, more open, and more apparent to the trained observer. Neurotics have been exposed as a rule to strong super-ego development, whereas one seldom finds a good amount of moral training in the backgrounds of offenders, particularly habitual offenders.

Abrahamsen makes only modest claims for the validity of his

⁵ Schilder-Kaiser: *A Study in Criminal Aggressiveness*, Genet. Psychol. Monog. XVIII, Nos. 5 and 6.

⁶ Abrahamsen, David, M.D.: *Personality Reaction to Crime and Disease*. The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 104, No. 1, July 1946, p. 80.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 80.

⁸ Abrahamsen, David, M.D.: *Psychosomatic Disorders and Their Significance in Antisocial Behavior*. American Psychiatric Ass'n., Chicago, May, 1946.

theory which impresses me as well thought out and useful as a working concept in criminology. The statement of it in mathematical form is merely a conceptual device, however, and no one should be lulled into a feeling of security regarding our knowledge of criminal behavior. Present knowledge in the field is still pitifully inadequate and treatment methods still more so. This occurs, I think, because mental life and processes are largely inaccessible except to psychoanalytic techniques. As a consequence, correctional workers, not possessing as a rule any considerable degree of psychological training, are apt to lay great stress on the function of environmental factors in producing criminal behavior. Hence occurs all the emphasis on the broken home, poverty, sibling rivalry, overprotection, overindulgence, and so forth. These factors are readily detectible and are often seized upon by probation officers as the "cause" of criminal behavior. The fact that millions of persons experience these social situations but do not become criminals is sufficient evidence to refute the environmentalists. They may, however, become neurotics or make a good social adjustment on a compensatory basis.

It is a rare probation department that carries on any real research, other than the compilation of environmental statistics of doubtful validity and reliability. Research in the field of criminology has been undertaken only by foundations or isolated candidates for the Ph. D. degree in the social sciences. As pointed out by Reuben C. Brustuen,⁹ there is seldom any cooperation for research purposes between probation departments and nearby university graduate study divisions. Politically speaking, the presentation to the legislature of validated research showing the efficacy of more intensive treatment of probationers and parolees is a good plan to obtain the necessary funds.

If we assume the general validity of the theory discussed in this paper and if we agree that crime should be viewed as a social disease, then Abrahamson's threefold proposal for crime prevention is relevant.¹⁰

1. Basic treatment must start with maladjusted children if we are to overcome behavior problems in childhood.

2. Early detection and psychiatric treatment of potential offenders will reduce the number of criminals.

3. Research in the field of criminology might best be directed toward investigations of (a) the working of the mind of the criminal, and (b) the interrelationship between psychosomatic factors in bodily disease and criminal behavior.

⁹ Brustuen, Reuben, C.: "Growing Points for Parole," *Focus*, May 1948, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Federal Probation*, Oct. 1947, p. 38.