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Hector J. Ritey

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ON THE ETIOLOGY OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Hector J. Ritey

The following article was read before the World Congress of Criminology at its recent sessions in Paris. The author was educated and trained in Psychiatry at the Universities of Genoa and Paris. He is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and was formerly connected with the Clinic of the Domestic Relations Court, the Bellevue Hospital and the Mount Sinai Hospital—all in New York City. From 1944 to 1946 he was Captain in the U. S. Army, M.C. He is now in private practice.—EDITOR.

The most difficult problem in facing Juvenile Delinquency is to give an exact definition of the term itself. There are no two authors who agree in the definition of the term Juvenile Delinquency.

The legal conception is even more obscure and varies from one state to another to such an extent that no statistic on a nation wide basis is reliable, because the data of the states are not comparable.¹ Some states limit their jurisdiction to 16 years, others to 17, or 18, and still others to 21. In some states the limit of age varies for boys and girls. Some states include an "alleged" delinquent and others "adjudged" delinquent in their statistics. The lack of unity in the statistics merely reflects the lack of unity in the basic conception. Contradictions are, therefore, to be expected also in the study of determinant and occasional causes.

This is better illustrated by an example. All the authors and statisticians agree on the enormous importance of good housing as a means of preventing Juvenile Delinquency. There is no discussion as to the fact that in urban areas the incidence of Juvenile Delinquency in slum areas is vastly greater than incidence in the more privileged residential districts. However, there is agreement that incidence of Juvenile Delinquency is greater in cities than in rural areas. At the same time, we are made aware of the fact that over-crowdedness, lack of elementary facilities, and lack of hygienic conditions are on the whole much more accentuated in the rural areas than in the cities. Is therefore proper housing the answer to the problem? This contradiction illustrates the fact that the causes of Juvenile Delinquency are so complex, so inter-dependent, with a multitude of factors, that every time we try to explain its incidence on the basis of one aspect, we find ourselves on the wrong track.

The psychological approach to the problem, whether made by a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychoanalyst, does not deal with Juvenile Delinquency, but with individual Juvenile Delinquents. Juvenile Delinquency is an entity based on one outstanding symptom in individuals whose basic problems are essentially different. However, can we state

1. REPORT IN STATISTICS, NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, Washington, D. C., 1946.

that this over-all important symptom is merely a coincidence and that there is no etiologic unity in the group?

Crime is not a breach of the law; it is a breach in the human personality. The law is the consequence, and not the determinant, of the crime. The breaking point in the relationship individual *vs.* community is tied at least to one cause which we find in every such individual. This cause is the existence of an area of less resistance, which is the integration of the individual to his environment. This diminished resistance exists in the individual subjected to some strain arising from emotional development as well as in the individual who cannot react against social or economic factors. Whether it is a violent trauma or a more subtle cause acting continuously for years, or a combination of these and other factors, the breaking point always occurs in the same area.

CRIME AND PERSONALITY

That is why the study of the personality of the delinquent must consider the combination of these two factors:

- (a) Determinant cause; (b) What has generated the area of minor resistance.

It is less important than generally believed to determine whether social-economical or emotional factors are to be considered as the outstanding causes. Once we establish the principle that any such factor acts on the individual whose breaking point is near, we should leave such consideration more to the study of the individual case than use it to formulate a general theory. Finally, even the economic and social factors become psychologic factors when they apply to each individual. What determines human behavior is not, for instance, financial inadequency, but the way the individual reacts to his financial inadequency.

It is possible that some social and economic factors act so strongly that pressure is felt by the majority of those whose threshold of resistance in the area of individual-community relationship is low. But even in this connection the approach by statistics may be misleading. Even if the incidence of crime in slum areas is much higher than in more privileged areas, the ratio criminal *vs.* normal population of the same areas is still so low that it is impossible to incriminate the slum area as the predominant factor on an objective scientific basis.

In addition, we cannot avoid the fact that people of high economic standing are very often not represented in the statistics. A pregnant unwed girl of minor age, belonging to a poor family, has to resort to community resources for help and therefore unavoidably is included in

the statistic. A girl from a wealthy family under the same circumstances may be sent on a trip and, therefore, with private help, avoid becoming a statistic. Likewise, the poor boy who commits some petty theft is brought to court, while the rich boy who signs a rubber check to pay his gambling debts is covered by his family before the check is brought to the attention of the bank. If we could have complete statistics, including the reported and unreported cases, we would probably see that the higher incidence of Juvenile Delinquency among the poor people is not a reality.

Oftentimes psychiatrists and psychologists are likewise one-sided in their views. They consider only one aspect of the problem, namely, the emotional factor of the immediate traumatic cause, and fail to give adequate importance to what was the underlying cause of the diminished threshold of resistance. Later some authors, notably William H. Sheldon,² have laid stress upon the "constitution as the etiological factor of crime." This might be a step in the direction of solving the problem of the "breaking point," although in this regard, too, a one-sided approach gives us an orientation but not the definite answer.

ABOUT JUVENILE DELINQUENTS

At this point, we should dwell on the question why Juvenile Delinquency should be considered as a separate problem from criminality in general. The legal aspect of the point is clear, even if the limits of age are not uniform throughout the different states and even more so from one country to another. But the psychologist has a completely different view of the problem. The difference does not lie in the children's conception of responsibility, experience or maturation brought by age.

The real characteristic of the period of growth is its extreme dynamics. Any kind of deformation, whether in thought or in behavior, which is manifested in that period, is often a symptom of growth and not a pathological manifestation, even when in an adult this symptom would be definitely pathological. This conception, by no means original and very often used to explain psycho-pathological symptoms on the basis of persistence of infantile problems, is sometimes overlooked when we deal with Juvenile Delinquents, because the symptom itself generally draws all the attention.

We cannot be too harsh against parents who become unduly alarmed over such symptoms. When a child tries to enter the subway without

2. VARIETIES OF DELINQUENT YOUTH. Harper and Brothers, 1950.

paying his fare or steals a pencil from his schoolmate, the parents may be inclined to believe that he is headed for a career of violating the property laws. Oftentimes educators, ministers, or others connected with child training fall into the same pattern. For a psychiatrist the symptom is indicative of something completely different. It is the expression of a growing process. If allowed to continue, it may manifest itself later through other symptoms that do not necessarily belong to the criminologic area. In many cases, the process exhausts itself in the normal course of growth.

Some discussions are based on misunderstanding, because when a psychiatrist advises the family not to get unduly alarmed at the misbehavior of a child, he is told in reply that he does not give enough importance to such manifestations. In reality, it is not the measure of importance but the stress which is different. Likewise, the physician may be alarmed by the symptom of an enuretic child, but not because he thinks the child is going to wet his bed later in adult life.

We can add also another comparison, remembering how many normal productions of the adolescent years are close to the symptoms of schizophrenia. A tentative diagnosis of early schizophrenia is made, and not so seldom in adolescents who later develop into adults without psychotic manifestations even if they were not given adequate treatment.

On the other hand no one is going to under-estimate any schizophrenic symptom which begins in adulthood. Likewise, no one is going to under-estimate a criminal behavior which appears in adulthood. At this point, the personality does not show the dynamic changes of the period of growth. Some continuation of the symptoms and in the behavior is to be expected in either case. Frequency of recurrence is the paramount difference between juvenile and adult delinquency. Prognosis and treatment therefore rest on completely different basis.³

Obviously, the appearance of delinquent behavior in childhood and adolescence must also warn us of the possibility of persistence in adulthood. The Juvenile Delinquent can also become an adult Delinquent, as an adolescent with early schizophrenic symptoms can turn into a schizophrenic later. It can never be made too emphatic that extreme flexibility is required in diagnosis and prognosis, and mostly in treatment.

It would follow from the above that the problem of prognosis is the real peculiarity of Juvenile Delinquency. We must not only explain in terms of what happened and of what is happening, but mostly in terms of what does this mean to the process of evolution. We must

3. See SHELDON AND ELEANOR GLUECK, *Juvenile Delinquents Grown Up*. The Commonwealth Fund, 1940.

evaluate what led to the break in the relationship of individual-community, how the symptom itself will influence the future, and how the same causes which led to the symptom will or will not continue to operate within the individual. In addition to all those factors, we must evaluate the importance of the whole picture in relationship to the peculiarity of the problem of that particular age-level and age-intelligence. Mostly, we must always be ready to forget theories, psychiatric as well as sociological, and bow to the findings of the individual case, remembering that finally each human being is an entity to himself.

We can, therefore, give this standard definition of a Juvenile Delinquent: A human being in the period of growth whose behavior indicates a disharmony in the individual-community relationship. Such disharmony, whether brought about by emotional, social-economic, or other factors, or a combination of many of them, manifests a sign of less resistance in the area of integration between the Ego and the Non-Ego factors.

It is therefore necessary to keep in mind at all times that any problem of behavior, environment, re-education and treatment must be commensurate to the personality of the subject and not to the manifestation itself. Such an approach as dealing with "Juvenile Robbers" or "Early Prostitutes" is not conducive to any constructive program. Likewise, general provisions as related to children of under-privileged, social or economic groups are likewise only scratching the surface of the problem. Of course, clearance of the slums and end of discrimination are favorable measures but they will not solve the basic problem radically.

AMERICAN STATISTICS

The problem to what extent correctional Institutions and private treatment influence the course of a Juvenile Delinquent's career in the U. S. is still under consideration. As mentioned above, the statistics of different states are not comparable because the basic criteria are not uniform.

Some individual studies cast some light on the problem, although their range is necessarily limited. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck⁴ come to the conclusion that family environment is a more important factor than rehabilitation in correctional Institutions in determining the future of a Juvenile Delinquent. The group they followed to adulthood showed 40 percent of non-delinquents at the age of 29.

A more recent study⁵ shows the same general trend. Quoting her

4. *Op. cit.*

5. MAUD A. MERRILL, *Problems of Child Delinquency*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947.

personal experience as well as the conclusions of many authors, the author stresses the importance of the age at the time of the first offense as a prognostic factor. The younger the offender, the more probably he will repeat his offense. Theft leads not only as the most frequent single item, but also as the offense which more often leads to reoccurrence.

A DYNAMIC VIEWPOINT

In a recent article, Dr. George E. Gardner⁶ puts the stress, in respect to etiology delinquent behavior, upon aggressive-destructive impulses. His contribution is remarkable mostly because the emphasis is placed on the destructive aspect of stealing. The old fashioned theory that stealing by children is an expression of a desire to possess, mainly hinged on envy of more privileged children who possess a given object, does not correspond to the clinical experience. More often than otherwise, children who are brought to court for petty stealing of objects worth a few cents, or who try to get transportation without paying the fare, have actually been found to have more money in their pockets than necessary to cover the expense. Even the fact of reducing any form of stealing to an expression of castration anxiety, both in the male and female, is too mechanistic. Such mechanism is not deniable but it is not a criterium which covers every case of stealing.

Dr. Gardner's reference to any manifestation as the expression of a biological necessity reminds us of a fundamental notion, namely, that destruction is primarily a reaction of defense without which no organism can live. The process of dis-assimilation is as necessary as the process of assimilation to insure life. Delinquency, which is the accentuation of the destructive process (see Gardner's article for more detailed explanation of the mechanism) may be grossly classified alongside of those reactions which accentuate the action of destruction, or in other words, the catabolic phase of metabolism.

The process of integration of one's personality in the community, regardless of how large, or how desirable the community is, is in itself an anabolic process. Because we cannot expect our metabolism to be constantly anabolic, nor the catabolic process to be reduced to the essentials, some excess on the catabolic side is to be expected under the best adjusted conditions in the period of growth. This disharmony is present even in normal life. Paradoxically enough, we may even come to the conclusion that some form of delinquent behavior in children might almost be an expression of normalcy. As a matter of fact, we would

6. MENT. HYG., Oct., 1949.

not expect a child to be 100 percent obedient, abiding by every rule and always doing what is expected of him. Such a child, compulsive as he would be, might be closer than a disobedient child to developing a psychosis, or even closer than one with mild delinquent behavior.

However, the statistics are concerned with facts and not with motivations. In addition, community life in schools, recreational areas, children's organization like clubs, scout groups, etc., and even family life cannot exist without at least a minimum of law-abiding attitude. It is unavoidable, however, broadminded as we may be, that a child should learn law-abidance by the consequence of infringement of rules, even when, from his own standpoint, such infringement is a perfectly psychological development. I don't see how it is possible to conciliate every element, so that there would be an ideal set-up without conflicts between the reality of a child's growth and the reality of community rules and regulations. The problem is not to eliminate a conflict through formulas, whether written laws or psychological devices, but to acknowledge the existence of such conflict, and be ready to meet it by means of individual approach and to use it for the purpose of enlarging the child's experience, i.e., giving him constructive material for the future. Mostly, it is the adult, parent, educator, or psychologist, who must control his own fear and avoid projecting it upon the child.

This approach, even if seemingly paradoxical, is in reality optimistic, because there is no breach of law, from the most insignificant to the severest, which cannot be turned into a constructive lesson.