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THE RELATION BETWEEN CRIME AND PSYCHOPATHIC PERSONALITY

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Aware that much appears to have been made of an alleged affinity between psychopathic personality and the propensity towards crime, I would point out first that the very concept of "psychopathic personality" is itself variously defined, variously interpreted, and variously understood by investigators of behavioral phenomena. Though the affinity just mentioned may well be a perfectly authentic one, it would be insufficient to justify our summarily ruling out the possibility that crimes *are* sporadically committed by human beings other than those who can be strictly referred to the category of "psychopathic personality." Hysteric and paranoid types, for example, are surely capable, under certain precipitating circumstances, of criminal conduct; so, indeed, are epileptic or epileptoid types.

Now precisely what is *psychopathic personality*? How do we recognize and diagnose it? In what essential details does it differ from other defective character-structures?

By the designation *psychopathic personality*, I myself have come, through both observation and experience, to understand a particular kind of characterologic or temperamental make-up characterized by certain diffuse symptoms belonging, strictly, neither to the sphere of neurosis nor to that of psychosis; and—what is perhaps more significant—by an apparent absence of *common moral and ethical sensibility*, or the ability to make a fundamental distinction between what is right and what is wrong according to the generally accepted criteria adopted by society. Among these aforementioned diffuse symptoms, one may enumerate the following: so-called eccentricities of one sort or another; indifference to social demands and unawareness of social responsibilities; flagrant disregard of the needs and rights of other people; excessive selfishness and overweening egocentricity; failures in attempts at adaptation; vagrancy, instability, shiftlessness; etc. I should hardly, of course, care to go so far as to maintain that such characterologic or temperamental traits are invariably found to exist in exactly the same

combinations or proportions, or that these same traits inevitably evince precisely the same degree of accentuation, in any given case of psychopathic personality. Furthermore, certain of the symptoms just enumerated might be exhibited no less frequently by persons who could be more accurately classified either as neurotics or as psychotics.

In the ultimate analysis, however, perhaps the chief distinguishing feature in psychopathic personality is nothing but a conspicuously defective or else almost completely undeveloped super-ego (Freud) which results in the psychopath's being, to all intents and purposes, quite unmoved by any sense of the difference between socially desirable and socially undesirable behavior; or—to couch the matter in different words—by any power to perceive even elementary distinctions between good and evil. In striking contrast, therefore, to the psychopath, the neurotic often suffers, not from an undeveloped super-ego, but rather from repressions (Freud) instituted at the behest of too stern and demanding a super-ego. In cases of paranoia, schizophrenia, manic-depressive reactions, and certain organically determined psychotic disturbances, the conflicts have, on the other hand, been so drastic as virtually to nullify the functions of both ego and super-ego. In my opinion, the absence of super-ego workings in psychopathic personality is to be ascribed rather to constitutional deficiency than to dynamic repression in the sense of Freud. Psychopathic personalities give us, then, the impression that they are victims of a congenital lack of any foundation on which to construct a super-ego which might serve as a safeguard to preclude acts of a criminal variety.

Should we follow the reasoning of Bromberg,¹ we shall be obliged to recognize no fewer than three separate and relatively independent types of psychopathic personality. To these three types, Bromberg has given the following designations:

1. Psychopathic personality.
2. Schizoid psychopathic personality.
3. Paranoid psychopathic personality.

The three types show symptoms by which they can be differentiated from one another, though at the same time they have in common the same lack of moral and ethical susceptibility, with the result that they prove capable of diverse forms of criminal behavior. Bromberg himself makes the observation that the paranoid psychopathic personality is more especially prone to crimes like that, for instance, of blackmail, since such crimes afford him an opportunity to bring others under his

1. BROMBERG, WALTER: *CRIME AND THE MIND*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1948.

own control and thus to augment his sense of power. On the other hand, the schizoid psychopathic who has, let us say, committed murder will have a tendency, according to Bromberg's ratiocination, to identify himself with his victim, this having for him the significance of suicide. Bromberg's hypothesis regarding the paranoid type is plausible to the point of being actually logical; the other hypothesis appears, however, to be restricted to the realm of mere theory and speculation. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the service Bromberg has performed in drawing our attention to the fact that at least three relatively independent types of psychopathic personality can be distinguished.

In our effort to arrive at a few valid conclusions regarding the posited relation existing between psychopathic personality and the proclivity to crime, we may do well enough to recall the words of Goethe, whom Abrahamsen² quotes as having once remarked that he never had heard of a crime towards which he could not trace in himself at least some small inclination. Such candor on the part of a gigantic figure like Goethe is delightful and precious for its own sake; and if we ourselves were to think about the matter sufficiently, no doubt we should discover that what Goethe said of himself is no less true of us! The tendency to commit acts of unwarrantable aggression is, therefore, a purely relative matter. In his provocative if sometimes merely speculative *Battle of the Conscience*, Bergler³ has emphasized that almost anybody is able from time to time to bribe his super-ego by rationalizing his foibles or shortcomings. By this, Bergler means nothing more than that the sense of wrong-doing which ought to be present in *consciousness* has been conveniently *repressed* (again in the sense of Freud) in the interest of sparing the ego a painful realization which might leave a noticeable dint in the ego's idealized concept of itself. In cases of genuine psychopathic personality, on the other hand, we frequently enough are led to assume that feelings associated with guilt do not exist in even a *repressed* form.

We have reached now a consideration which ought to be of some assistance to us in further researches where psychopathic personality is concerned. *So long as we can detect any definite sign of even a latent compunction resulting from criminal behavior, we are justified in believing that the super-ego is by no means really nonexistent, but that the guilt-feelings have been simply relegated to the sphere of the unconscious, where they serve the dynamic and teleologically useful purpose*

2. ABRAHAMSEN, DAVID: CRIME AND THE HUMAN MIND. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.

3. BERGLER, EDMUND: THE BATTLE OF THE CONSCIENCE. Washington: Washington Institute of Medicine, 1948.

of *shielding the ego against the recognition of painful truths*. To repeat a point made earlier in this paper: experience teaches us that such repression is only the rule in neurosis, but that we have little evidence to justify our assuming that genuine psychopaths harbor either a conscious or an unconscious sense of guilt for their misdeeds or their transgressions.

As I have pointed out at the beginning of this paper, we should be grossly mistaken if we allowed ourselves to embrace the notion that psychopathic personalities are the only defective personality-types capable of the commission of major crimes. These other types are, however, differentiated from true psychopathic personalities by the presence of behavior which is indicative of at least some remnants of a super-ego function. When paranoid individuals, for instance, come into conflict with the legal machinery, they are at great pains to rationalize their actions by asserting, sometimes vociferously, but always with strenuous emphasis, that they have done nothing except to take righteous revenge on certain people because of injuries which they have suffered at the hands of those people. They may attempt further to justify their acts by alleging that the Almighty Himself has enjoined them to behave as they have done. Crimes perpetrated by such paranoid individuals appear, then, to have often as their basis a pathologically self-righteous desire for retaliation or revenge, though of course additional factors may be simultaneously operative. (Incidentally, the paranoid types referred to in this paragraph are not necessarily the same as Bromberg's paranoid psychopathic personalities.)

As additional examples showing the variety of deviant types that are driven to crime of one sort or another, victims of sexual anomalies like homosexuality, sadism, fetichism, etc., may be cited here. If, however, we accept the nearly inescapable view that ethical deficiency is perhaps the prime distinguishing feature of psychopathic personality, then we shall be obliged to exclude from the category of major criminal offenders a rather large number of sexual aberrants, because empirical considerations teach us that numerous homosexuals, for example, are frequently subject to deep feelings of guilt, and that they may make a conscious effort to suppress their sexual drives so far as possible, in the interest of avoiding skirmishes with the law and of not incurring the overt disapproval of the community. Even when homosexuals find themselves involved in legal proceedings, they generally prove to be mere law-breakers rather than actual criminals—a distinction which Lindner⁴ has been the first, so far as I know, to set forth. Indeed, as

4. LINDNER, ROBERT M.: *Stone Walls and Men*. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1947.

I myself have pointed out in another paper,⁵ genuine homosexuals—or “absolute inverts” in the sense of Freud—hardly fail to give one the impression that crime, as usually understood, would be beyond them; for they are endowed with a soft, feminine, rather artistic temperament which would be almost ludicrously incongruous with acts of undue aggression. Moreover, seldom enough do they manifest in conspicuous measure any of the same traits by which psychopathic personality is characterized. This, of course, leaves the objective investigator with some question in his mind as to the justice of indiscriminately equating inverted sexuality with psychopathic personality. I cautiously suggest, therefore, that it might be more logical to place such human beings in the category of neurotic individuals—a suggestion already made by Karpman⁶—or else to maintain a separate and relatively independent method of classification for those whose sexual instinct diverges from what is accepted as the norm. A homosexual, a masochist, or a fetichist who is conscious of the socially unacceptable form taken by his erotic impulse, and who is, on this account, a prey to conscious guilt-reactions, is hardly comparable to a real psychopath to whom guilt-feelings are evidently unknown. Of the real psychopath, the poet Tennyson has intuitively given us a perfect description in one of the most beautiful stanzas from his *In Memoriam*:

“I envy not the beast that takes
His license in the field of time,
Unfettered by the sense of crime;
To whom a conscience never wakes.”

For reasons which have been stated quite clearly in this paper, the category now nebulously labelled “psychopathic personality” stands in need of radical re-examination. Some investigators are obviously in the deplorable habit of promiscuously grouping together under the heading of “psychopathic personality” a variety of traits and reactions which indubitably could be more scientifically classified into a number of other categories. On the other hand, an excessively rigid system of classification might do even more harm than the present rather chaotic one. Whenever we are endeavoring to deal scientifically with behavioral variants, we must be prepared to take into account a relativity, an overlapping, or a certain mingling of the individual elements which compose the symptom-structure.

5. THORNTON, NATHANIEL: *Some Aspects of Male Prostitution*. London: THE JOURNAL OF SEX EDUCATION, 1949. Vol. 2, No. 1.

6. KARPMAN, BEN: Chapter on *Criminal Psychopathology*, in PROGRESS IN NEUROLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1948.

Primarily, the purpose of this paper has been to examine the relationship allegedly existing between psychopathic personality and the tendency towards crime, and to indicate how the concept of psychopathic personality stands sorely in need of clearer, sharper, more rational definition than is currently given to it. This holds true not only with regard to the psychopath but also—as has been likewise suggested—with regard to the classification of personality in general. Though it may well be that mathematical precision is never to be attained in the sphere of personality study, yet surely the loose terminology which so often prevails today in supposedly scientific quarters can on no grounds whatsoever be justified.