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FACTORS IN THE MOTIVATION OF SEXUAL OFFENDERS

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Any constructive or remedial approach to the problem of crime in general requires as thorough a comprehension as possible of the motivation of the offender. Even superficial and cursory thought makes this statement self-evident. To make his case complete the detective has to find the motive for the crime. A jury may render a verdict without a complete appreciation of the forces impelling the defendant to his behavior, but it will never feel confident of the justness of such an opinion. One and the same criminal act appears to the observer in an entirely different light according as the propelling forces which determined the act are varied; murder committed in the act of armed robbery is very different from killing in self-defense or from the killing of the intruder who threatens the sanctity and security of the family and home. Juridical thought has always attempted to evaluate most accurately the motivation of an offense, and justice is presumably dispensed with this concept in mind; the *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—no longer prevails; mitigating and extenuating circumstances are supposedly given due consideration.

Despite the ready acceptance which such statements usually receive, the law has been able to give to them little more than lip service. For it is only in the rarest of circumstances that the criminal himself, let alone the judge or jury, has any but the most skimpy awareness of the dynamic forces within his personality which force him into the commission of a deed. Any significant piece of behavior has a multiple determination, and only those reasons which are acceptable to the conscience of the doer are permitted into his field of awareness. The philanthropist who donates a large sum of money to a worthy cause is ready to believe himself activated by altruistic endeavors, but any suspicion that he may be seeking self-aggrandizement is likely to be quickly repressed. It is only by intensive psychiatric and psychologic examination, coupled with the ancillary data supplied by the social worker and probation officer, subjecting to penetrating scrutiny and revealing insight the emotional constellations which preceded the perpetration of a criminal offense, that the motivations of the offender can be convincingly understood. Such investigations not only lay the groundwork for the true adminis-

tration of justice, but dispel from the professional worker the attitude of hopelessness that is likely to arise in the face of the statistics of recidivists, and to replace that attitude with a zestful conviction that rehabilitation is more than an empty word.

Nowhere in the field of criminology is this lack of appreciation of motives more clearly seen than in the area of sexual offenses. The seeming transparency of the wish behind the act is all too deceptive. Since all of us feel sexual desire and engage in day dreams and phantasies of the immediate and easy fulfillment of such wishes, the public is all too prone to attribute to the sexual offender the same conscious motives and to censure him heavily for the lack of self-control and will power to behave in a decent manner. Without condoning aggressive sexual crimes in any way, it may be said in all objectivity that these men do not simply fail to exercise self-control, but go through the most painful and distressing emotional conflicts before they fling caution to the winds and engage in behavior which they themselves adjudge to be most reprehensible. The sexual offender is not master in his own home; he is powerless before the onslaught of forces within himself which make him disregard even the rules of self-preservation. The following quotation from a columnist in a New York newspaper, written some months ago, is illustrative of the nihilistic and pessimistic, not to mention dangerous, attitude engendered by a lack of appreciation of the forces determining sexual offenses:

"I come . . . now to the New Jersey State Commission on Sex Offenses, and its finding that treatment is more important than punishment. This is essentially rot, and proven rot, because there is no treatment for a sex offender that will guarantee to make him less a menace, short of shooting him or locking him up . . . I say that there is no cure for the potential murderer-pervert because the best psychiatric hands have been laid on lots of them, such as the mass murderer, Robert Irwin, and all they ever get is more frustrated and more viciously a threat to the innocents around them. They are abnormals who get their kicks from the simple pleasure of contemplated murder, and one of these days they try it out for size Dealing harshly with a proven pervert is merely a matter of removing the source of contagion from the crowded scene. . . . The platform is simple. Weep for these drooling creeps. Treat them if you can. Pray for them. Anything you can do for them, do it, but when they manifest themselves for what they are — . . . —shut 'em up. One dead baby is worth more tears than the lost happiness of the whole degenerate lot."

It is perhaps most charitable to say that this wholesale condemnation of a large mass of humanity, this wish for a minor genocide, is to be attributed to ignorance of the facts. It is difficult to reconcile the statements of the columnist with the data of observation concerning a wealthy, industrious and respected man, a pillar of his community,

responsibly active in social, civic and church affairs, who after a long period of duress, engages in incestuous relations with his vengeful daughter; or with the numerous other instances in which the resolution of an intolerable emotional conflict would have prevented a sexual transgression and condemnation by society of a very worthwhile human being.

Concerning the aggressive sexual offender the opinion is prevalent that he is a man without a conscience, that he has no concern for the welfare of others and that he is almost exclusively preoccupied with the urgent need to gain the gratification of his baser desires regardless of the consequences. While it is true that this description may aptly be applied to the offender during the few fleeting minutes in which he commits his crime, it would be a great mistake to assume that it is an accurate picture of his entire personality. It has omitted the long chain of events which makes the final outcome comprehensible, the mounting doubts as to his value as an individual, the increasing evidence of failure in important areas of functioning, the drastic and vigorous attempts to deny his self-contempt, and the final explosive act designed to rid him of the intolerable inner tension. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a group of men more sensitive to the opinions which others hold about them, and more eager to win the good will of society. It must sound utterly paradoxical, and yet it is true, that these men, even in their aggressive acts so disastrous in their consequences, are striving to live up to high ideals and to postpone for as long as possible the shattering and depressing conviction that they will never find acceptance as men. Certainly their efforts to win this acceptance miscarry badly, but it must be borne in mind that all ordinary channels for the gaining of self-respect seem closed to them.

Examination of sexual offenders always reveals with striking clarity a feature of personality make-up common to all of them. They have a great contempt for themselves as men. In all important areas of life, in social activity, in love, in work, they see themselves failing or inevitably destined to fail. Even when succeeding they do not believe the evidence of their own perceptions; they feel that they have won by luck, or that their deficiencies have so far escaped detection, and that they are frauds for whom exposure and condemnation is certain. By and large, they are not consciously aware of this self-contempt and this lowly evaluation which they have in their own eyes; they are too busy trying to drown out the slightest evidence that this might be the truth about them. In the effort to prove that they are not inferior and despicable human beings, they do what is never suspected of them by the

public; they set their sights too high, and aim at ideals incapable of attainment by any one. The resultant failure to achieve the desired goals only consolidates their inner conviction of inadequacy, weakness and fraudulence. They hunger with an intense avidity for appreciation, respect and love, not so much for the sake of these experiences themselves, but so that the weight of opinion of others will override the force of the inner voice which constantly speaks to them of their insufficiencies. However, their need for approbation is insatiable, since it is designed to counteract a never ending stream of self abuse.

This personality constellation is in evidence in every sex offender before he commits his crime, and the aggressive sexual act is entered into, not for the immediate gratification of sexual needs, but to dispel the pain that has mounted in severity through the years. The sexual offender is often separated from his wife because he finds it impossible to believe that another person can love him. He dreads his own children because they offer him a challenge which he fears he cannot meet, and he has the most intense doubt that he can carry so heavy a responsibility; on the contrary, he feels that he needs much help, support and love before he will be able to give to others. He often has a poor work record, not because he does not have the capacity or readiness to work effectively and industriously, but because he feels unwanted and irrationally expects to be discharged at any moment.

The aggressive sexual crime is a desperate, ill-considered and frantic attempt to overcome wounded pride, to repair injured self-esteem and to escape mortification. The rapist who overpowers a woman unfamiliar to him is symbolically trying to force warmth and acceptance from the woman who has held herself aloof in her contempt for him. The sexual act does not mean sexual gratification to him; it has the irrational significance of being a convincing demonstration that he can win acceptance. The father who has incestuous sex relations with his own daughter often believes himself motivated by the strongest love, while trying to convince himself that he can be loved by those near and dear to him. The man who engages in sex play with little boys is unconsciously lavishing on them the love he would have liked to receive from his own parents. The exhibitionist is, among other things, trying to win appreciation and admiration, and to prove that the world is not a shocking and surprising place to him alone. To muster the courage and aggressiveness to engage in such behavior, the sexual offender has to borrow from the lessons of harshness and insensitivity to which he was exposed as a child.

From all of this it is apparent that the sex offender is a very sick man, psychiatrically speaking, who cannot be allowed his freedom in society until his disordered appraisal of the world around him has been rectified, and until he is no longer driven by pathological needs. He is aggressive where he should be restrained, and timid where he should be forceful. He feels guilty where he should feel righteous, and he is indignant where he should feel at fault. He feels unwanted where he has been accepted, and demands acceptance where it cannot be given. He is perplexed and bewildered by contradictory strivings, and cannot find his way out of his self-constructed maze. Left to himself, he can usually remain law-abiding only by forfeiting all claim to happiness, for which he struggles in vain anyway in his criminal offenses.

An appreciation of the motivation of sexual offenses reveals to the observer that these criminals suffer generally from neurotic character disorders which make it impossible for them to gratify in a law-abiding way the needs and desires which are so important to all human beings. No one can live without self-respect; it is a truism that an individual is ready to die when he holds for himself an unshakeable self-contempt. The attainment of self-esteem in our society requires that the individual be able to work effectively, to hold friends, to love and to be loved. These aims the sexual offender cannot fulfill in a socially approved manner; yet he cannot feel that he will ever attain security and well-being unless he continue to strive for their fulfillment in his own peculiar way. The way out of the dilemma for him, and the only method for the successful amelioration of this vast social problem, is the psychiatric understanding of the motives behind the sexual offense and the imparting to the offender of this insight in a manner convincing to him, so that he can put it into successful operation.