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PATHOLOGICAL FIRESETTERS

Melitta Schmideberg

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Dr. Schmideberg is the author of numerous books and scientific articles on psychoanalytic subjects, including the treatment of psychotics, criminals and psychopaths. Among them are: CHILDREN IN NEED, SHORT ANALYTIC THERAPY, "The Analytic Treatment of Major Criminals," "Psychoneuroses in Childhood, Their Etiology and Treatment," and "A Contribution to the Psychology of Persecutory Ideas and Delusions."—EDITOR.

For over a hundred and fifty years now law enforcement and justice have enlisted the aid of psychiatry in attempts to resolve the many thorny problems relating to arson. In the main it was a battle of wits concerning the medico-legal questions whether one who sets fires should be legally responsible for his acts. The term pyromania was born early in the nineteenth century and was meant to designate by many writers of that period and later a form of insanity identified by the impulse to set fires without the presence of a motive.

Modern advances in psychiatry, particularly in the area of psychoanalysis, have shown us that the term pyromaniac is psychiatrically obsolete as a diagnosis, except as to distinguish a predominant symptom among various types of mental pathology. It would be just as unscientific to offer a diagnosis such as holdup man, or forger, or burglar. In passing, though, it would seem that the term pyromaniac could have some practical value medico-legally to distinguish the true mental case from the firesetter with a rational motive.

We, in modern times, however, should temper whatever feelings of superiority we might have in regard to the older psychiatrists, since it is a striking fact that even one hundred years ago such Doctors as Boschoff in 1853, and Legrand du Saulle in 1856 connected the relationship between firesetting and sexual disturbances. It is an historical oddity that of the arson cases recorded, most of them were women, which is, I believe, contrary to the findings today.

In this paper I would rather discuss matters which could have practical application in dealing with arson, than indulge myself with speculations about psychodynamics, which I will confess, is a much easier task for me because the path is more heavily trod.

The most wonderful thing I could say would be that psychiatry

possessed some objective—or should I say magical—method of accurately determining what specific individual is going to commit arson. I will modestly admit that we have not yet reached that state of perfection. I am confident, though, that society would be amply satisfied, even without the above, if we in the psychiatric profession could offer some degree of assurance that once an arsonist is discovered, there is some means at our disposal of preventing recidivism. We can boil this down to a few questions and answers. Are firesetters treatable? And second, can we determine which ones are dangerous and will continue their destructive activities, and which ones can be trusted to be restored to the community? Naturally I can only answer these questions within certain limitations, or with certain reservations. For the first question, yes, many firesetters can definitely be treated and made responsible members of the community, even many of the serious ones. And as for the second, the obviously psychotic ones would be institutionalized in any event whether they were firesetters or not. And for the others I should recommend psychiatric care, in addition to mandatory supervision, until they receive a clean bill of health. This course of action is not impractical since the numbers of arsonists are not very high.

I have mentioned in the paragraph above that arsonists are treatable. Although much research in this area will have to be done to substantiate this more fully, I am in the above speaking from my own experience. In the years past and recently, I have treated a number of arson patients successfully. I will mention two of these in this paper who after three and a half and five year follow-ups, have stabilized and are leading law-abiding, respectable lives.

There is a strong similarity between the arsonist and the sex offender, both etiologically and symptomatically, and in the reaction they elicit from the community, justice, and our law-enforcing agencies. With no other type of crimes is there so much attached emotion, horror, and desire for revenge. In most cases of the sex offender, these feelings are unjustified, because only rarely is he a menace to the community. But with the arsonist, to some degree, such emotions are more material.

The crime of arson is a treacherous one. It often strikes at those beyond the scope of the arsonist's design, if we can say that some of them have designs. Thoughtlessly or otherwise, the arsonist unleashes a raging beast that is no respecter of property, young or old, rich or poor. Catastrophies like the Chicago Fire, the San Francisco Conflagration, are still remembered with all their horror.

Fortunately in modern times the pathological firesetter has a much

more difficult job carrying out his perverse purpose. If we look around us we see brick and steel and a firebox in every corner. This, more than anything else, has curbed the threat of the arsonist. But still the arsonists have a wider range than we would like. Thus when we know a person has once set a fire, it is perfectly reasonable to have concern about his setting another fire. Yet we are faced with the problem of either keeping all pathological firesetters in prison for life, which in certain States is actually a fact by reason of extremely long prison sentences, or after he serves his legal sentence, cross our fingers and utter a pious prayer that our firesetter will not repeat his disastrous performance, before we let him go.

I have had in the past some interest in a particular case of arson which brings up this point. This was the case of a youngster of 15, who set a fire in a private dwelling and as a result was sentenced to a reformatory. According to his reformatory record he was a model inmate. He abided by all rules of the institution and made such a good record there that he was released at a minimum time and with very little supervisory restrictions placed upon him. To the astonishment of the authorities concerned with this youth, a few months after his release, he developed a devilish plan of burglary which, naturally, revolved around fire setting. His plan was to set a number of dwellings on fire within a certain area and direct all attention upon these fires while he burglarized the premises of adjacent or near-by dwellings. In one of the fires a young child and an old man were burned to death.

He was apprehended in the general area of the fire with his arms laden with stolen property, and he readily confessed to having set the fires. During the sentencing there was some quibbling in the courtroom whether this youth was a firesetter or a burglar. The boy contended that he had set the fires merely in order to successfully burglarize the homes; that he didn't derive any pleasure from the fires themselves. His attorney, hired by the family, made a very big issue of this, indeed, because if the judge accepted the fact that he was primarily an arsonist, he would automatically have been given life in prison for second degree murder. As it was, the judge accepted the fact that he was a burglar, taking into consideration that he had just been released from a reformatory, and sentenced him from 7½ to 15 years in jail.

He was released from prison after 8 years, but unfortunately, I have no followup on this case as of today. What I do have are facts of this youth's reformatory behavior, which were not in his record,

and which distinctly pointed to the possibilities of his setting fires after his release, confirming without a doubt that the burglary was incidental and that the arson was paramount in his mind at the time of the crime. The facts were these: This youth in the reformatory committed a number of perversions on other inmates younger than he in the form of inserting the nozzle of the fire extinguishers into the rectums of these young boys and squirting the contents inside with painful results. Secondly, despite his good record throughout his 20 months stay at the reformatory, he was continually sadistic to the younger boys, particularly when he was put in charge of them in such manner as beating them on the bare buttocks with a broom handle, and burning them with cigarettes. These facts never got into the record.

It is evident from the foregoing facts that his subsequent crimes were not at all surprising. This points up sharply the most critical problem of the community in regard to firesetting and the firesetter. If the community was fully aware of the inherent danger in releasing this boy, or some other individual of similar pathology, then what course should they have taken? Should a boy of 17 be institutionalized indefinitely? Or is there some alternative? I feel that psychiatry offers such an alternative and in a marked sense can complement the work of the law enforcement agencies by taking up where the investigator leaves off.

The two cases I mentioned previously provide examples of the effectiveness of psychotherapy in certain cases at least. The first, which I shall describe, was a youth of 17, a South American whom we shall call Ricardo. This boy set fires, all of them small ones, from the age of 8 upward until the time I first saw him at age 17. He was the son of wealthy parents who could afford to cover up for most of his pathological activities. The sadism in the make-up of this boy was as obvious as that of the case of the boy in the reformatory. Such sadism is, I think, a distinguishing characteristic of many of the pathological firesetters.

An examination of the reports on Ricardo disclosed that he had been hyperkinetic and abnormal from earliest childhood. He attended twelve different schools, in some of which he lasted only one day. Thereafter, he was tutored privately. At the age of sixteen he was placed in a psychiatrically oriented school. He set three fires in three days there, assaulted other students and finally deliberately caused a sink to overflow, flooding classrooms on the floor below. Following this experience he was placed in a mental institution where he remained twenty-two months, receiving insulin and metrazel shock therapy,

together with almost continuous hydrotherapy in the form of tubs. His behavior in the institution followed the pattern of before; he played malicious practical jokes, stole watches, rings, and other personal property, destroyed radios and other instruments, broke furniture, etc. The report from there stated that "he was unable to learn by experience, that his promise meant nothing; he lied indiscriminately and could not be dealt with except by resorting to physical restraints of various types."

He never had any friends. His relationship with his sister was one of jealousy and incessant quarrels. He said quite openly at home that he wanted to sleep with her and his mother, and also that he wished his father dead. His father was reluctant to let him out of his sight, since he was the only one who to a degree had any control over him. He never played games and showed such a restiveness that one psychiatrist believed his condition to be due to an organic disturbance. He was sadistic toward animals, having drowned and burned kittens and puppies, poured boiling water on chickens, and one time set fire to a horse's tail. This sadism extended to younger children whom he would half strangle under the pretext of playing with them. At the age of eleven he nearly killed a man by throwing a sharp shovel down a well where the man was working. At the age of twelve he was expelled from school for undressing and taking a bath in the nude in the schoolyard. At age sixteen he urinated out a window onto the passersby below.

Most of the many psychiatrists who have seen him recommended permanent institutionalization. He was said to have no moral sense and no normal reactions of guilt, with an extreme narcissistic interest in his clothing, spending hours describing articles he would like to own. Though of normal intelligence, he was infantile in many respects.

The father was unbalanced himself, and the mother of a sweet and placid nature. For several months preceding the boy's first visit to me, there had been a slight improvement in his behavior, partly because the father had had some analysis himself and had treated the boy somewhat better; and partly because hormonal treatment had remedied his sexual underdevelopment which had caused him to feel deeply inferior. In spite of this improvement, however, he had set a fire two months earlier. The fact that he had been living at the time with an uncle who treated him reasonably well apparently had no influence in curbing him. The tenants of the building where he lived were afraid of him. His family had been given notice by

the superintendent because he was reported to have entered the apartment of a girl by force and threatened to rape her.

This is not the place to discuss dynamics or describe the technique of the psychiatric treatment of the patient. Enough, however, has been given to indicate that the case was serious both as far as pathology was concerned and the possible consequences of his act.

He was treated for two years. In the beginning he came every day, but as time went on he was seen less frequently. Treatment was terminated late in 1948. A colleague of mine who had examined the patient before I saw him had given a diagnosis of "schizophrenia with psychopathic trends" with prognosis poor. He recommended somatic treatment including shock and possibly lobotomy. The patient visited this doctor a year after the termination of treatment. My colleague called me to confirm the marked change in the boy as to his appearance, his demeanor, and attitude.

The patient now carries on responsible work for his father's export business and visits me from time to time when he comes to the United States. From all the indications I have, I am convinced that he is free of the dangerous impulses to set fires. Objectively speaking, even in the event he were not completely truthful with me, it is unlikely that he could keep any incendiary acts secret because of his past reputation, which would make him immediately suspect. This is, for me, a form of double check.

The second case, whom we shall call George, was an intelligent Jewish man of 25, who at the time of the crime had already achieved a position of responsibility in an advertising agency. He was a college graduate, and differing from the case above, there was no previous pathological record as far as we know. He was the only one of Jewish faith employed by this agency, and felt as an outsider.

The onset of George's criminal behavior was rather curious and not directly related to his incendiarism. He began by sending letters through the mail to various persons in his agency threatening them with violence if they did not bring about the discharge of George (the writer of the letters) because of his Jewish origin. In other words he attempted to create a situation which would justify his feelings of being discriminated against.

Following the sending of the letters, he set fire to the building housing the agency. The fire destroyed practically the whole building. This was done at a time when there was no one in the building. The subsequent investigation uncovered conclusive evidence of a deliberate fire setting. It is a credit to the intelligence of the investigators that they

were able to connect the threatening letters with the fire in such a way that all the evidence pointed to George. When confronted, he did not deny it. His reason, he said, was that he needed a vacation, and with the building destroyed he could be out until clearance was made.

It was obvious to everyone concerned in the case that, in view of the bizarreness of the acts and his reasons for them, they were dealing with a very much mentally disturbed person, probably psychotic. Subsequent psychiatric examination revealed no open delusions or other psychotic symptoms. There was no effort on either side, therefore, to try the case on grounds of legal insanity. Due consideration, however, was given to the psychiatric evidence that the crime was motivated by mental pathology, and as a result the arson charge was dropped. He was sentenced to a federal penitentiary for sending threatening letters through the mail.

Actually, had a more exhaustive psychiatric examination been made, or had the authorities known the extent of this patient's mental imbalance, undoubtedly the case would have been processed far differently. His disturbances were mainly in the sexual area. His sadistic sexual fantasies exceeded everything I have encountered before—including such items as whipping naked women, castrating men, committing sodomy with animals and then brutally killing them, and indulging in sexual orgies centering around the humiliation of women, particularly virgins, in a way in which I am not willing to describe at present.

The violent thread of sadism runs throughout this case just as it did with Ricardo and the first case mentioned in this paper. In the majority of the cases of arson I have treated or examined, I have found this to be true. This fact should always be taken into consideration in dealing with arsonists. It seems to me, however much it may run against our own feelings, that severe sentences in certain cases of arson are the only means of dealing with them. Take for example the case of the Hartford circus fire, where so many people were maimed and killed. Can there be any argument against a life sentence? There are many other cases too numerous to mention where no other solution is feasible.

Nevertheless, there is a large body of cases convicted of arson which can be salvaged through the use of intelligent discrimination and skilled treatment. Treatment moreover must be made a condition of release with many of the doubtful cases which otherwise must be considered bad risks.

Coming back to George, during his incarceration a beginning was made in treatment which though not intensive, served to prepare the ground for psychiatric treatment after his release. I treated him over a three year period on the basis of two visits a week. I have followed up this case since then for three years and find he is still doing very well indeed. Today, George holds a responsible position and has earned the respect of his profession and the community. Most of his associates are not aware of his criminal record.

Before leaving the above case I would like to point out an interesting fact. Though we are dealing with a person with superior intelligence, it was a long time before he was able to truly feel that the crime he had committed was heinous. It may sound strange that George quite seriously considered his incendiary act as a minor thing, preferring to focus his attention on his mental pathology. He argued that the building was an old one anyway, and that he had been extremely careful not to endanger anyone's life in setting the fire. He could not, he said, bring himself to mourn the loss of such an expendable thing as a building. None of the potential destructive horror of an incendiary act appeared in any of his early statements. This I believe is a typical attitude of many arsonists. Though they may talk freely about the act itself, seldom is there any real emotion or feeling of guilt relating to the crime. In George's case it proved to be the most difficult phase of treatment getting him to realize what he had done. He altered his viewpoint in the matter around the second year, and after that, thinking more normally, he wondered how he possibly could have maintained his former position.

There is a certain redundancy in the term "pathological fire setter" because in effect all fire setting must be considered pathological. If, however, we are to deal intelligently with the problem we must recognize the various finer shades of meaning. It may or may not be argued that a person who sets fire to a premises for the purpose of collecting insurance is not as pathological as one who starts a blaze for the purpose of gratifying strong sexual impulses. We do tend to react with less horror to the first than the latter in the popular belief that a sex motivation is uncontrollable whereas the first can be curbed. Only superficially will we find that an incendiary who sets fires for "understandable reasons" is not as unbalanced as one who sets them for more obscure reasons. An illustration of this is the case of the burglar first mentioned in this paper.

Superficial elements of incendiaryism are usually more misleading than helpful. By that I mean we should not take things at their face value

with an arsonist by saying that he did it for such and such a reason until we really have looked into the individual with every means at our command, including among others a thoroughgoing psychiatric examination. In the case of George the investigation was conducted with a great deal of competence in discovering the culprit, but the psychiatric examination was far too limited. Fortunately in his case he was able to receive treatment, thus possibly preventing serious consequences from such carelessness.

I would like to present a final case involving a youth of 18 which I did not treat but served in a consultative capacity. He set a fire in his mother's apartment in an old tenement house which fortunately was discovered early enough to prevent widespread damage and inevitable loss of life. The general impression of this youth on first meeting was a bad one; he was moody looking, his face showing a habitual tension. When spoken to he would go no farther than nod his head or speak at the most a few words. Perhaps we will get a better idea of the impression this boy made by the words of a detective who was present who said, "Aw, he's just a nut." As a result of this general feeling against the boy a high bail was set and he was sent for psychiatric observation. The main concern of the judge was whether he was a "pyromaniac" or not. The official agency that conducted the psychiatric examination merely reported that the youth was not psychotic. The judge was dissatisfied with the briefness of the report and referred the youth to the agency I head where I had occasion to see him. Our report to the court was lengthy, confirming the results of the previous examination. We pointed out, however, that though this boy needed psychiatric treatment, the incendiarism was accidental symptom rather than the important one. There was little evidence of a sadistic motivation beyond the revenge theme against the mother, with whom he had come to live a week previously after having been boarded out and neglected for 12 years previous.

As a result of our report the court withdrew the demand for bail and paroled the boy to his attorney. He was subsequently given youthful offender treatment with the proviso that he receive psychotherapy. He is doing fairly well today concerning himself mainly with his problems about earning enough money to support himself rather than anything approaching the crime for which he was apprehended.

In summation I suggest that in every case of arson the skills and knowledge of psychiatry should be regularly employed both in evaluating the patient and in the subsequent disposal of the case. Many offenders of this type can be successfully treated, and no doubt after

we have more experience in this field we will develop even more effective means. I do, however, want to make it clear that at this point in our knowledge I am not ready to say that treatment itself should take the place of punitive action in these cases. But after we have satisfied all the legal requirements whether it involves jail sentence or probation, we should not fail to take advantage of psychiatric methods to help prevent recidivism and thus safeguard society.