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EARLY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR OF LOWER-CLASS DELINQUENT GIRLS*

JOHN C. BALL AND NELL LOGAN

Dr. Ball is Professor of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Kentucky. He has been a frequent contributor to this *Journal* as well as to other periodicals. Professor Ball recently completed a monograph entitled, "Personality, Socialization and Delinquency: An Analytical Study with the MMPI." This book will be published by the University of Kentucky Press in late 1960 or early 1961.

Miss Logan was graduated from the University of Kentucky in June, 1957, with honors in sociology. She collected the data upon which this article is based under a Social Science Research Council Undergraduate Award.

In this article, Professor Ball and Miss Logan analyze their findings from interviews with 45 lower-class girls in a state reformatory. Most of the girls were incarcerated for reasons of sexual promiscuity, and this paper deals with the question, what were the social causes for their misbehavior? It was found that most of the girls' sexual experiences had occurred on dates, and that the girls regarded sexual intercourse as a normal, expected part of the dating pattern. They did, nevertheless, regard premarital intercourse as morally wrong. Professor Ball and Miss Logan conclude that the behavior of this group was conditioned by the norms of the girls' adolescent associates. The girls believed that their conduct was wrong, but they engaged in it for the sake of status among their respective peer groups.—EDITOR.

Attention in the present study is focused upon the early sexual experiences of delinquent girls, with a view to ascertaining the precise social conditions which were associated with the beginning of this type of deviant behavior. Theoretical considerations of this problem are far-reaching.¹ Thus, one

* The authors wish to thank Mr. Robert B. Hammond of Kentucky Village for his interest in this project. Acknowledgment is also made of financial assistance provided by the Social Science Research Council.

¹ The crux of the theoretical problem is that of defining deviant behavior in a manner that facilitates middle-range empirical generalizations and at the same time provides a conceptual framework that enables integration of the personality and social systems. There is in this regard a considerable semantic impediment in attempting categorically to define deviancy and non-deviancy, or delinquent and nondelinquent behavior, as mutually exclusive entities. When this is done, however, attention may be focused upon demonstrating the appropriateness of specific words in describing social action rather than upon the empirical ascertainment of behavioral correlates themselves.

In addition to problems of questionable dichotomization without empirical substantiation, there remains the formidable task of relating the rapidly expanding theoretical structure of the social science—evident, in particular in the works of Talcott Parsons—to various empirical realms. At least in its broad outlines the comprehensive theoretical model exists. Yet the fact remains that articulation of contemporary research with this system model is singularly tenuous or, in many instances, non-existent.

The need to advance and substantiate hypotheses of the middle-range has been discussed by Merton. MERTON, *SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE*,

may ask: what types of social relationships led to or were associated with early sexual promiscuity? To what extent were the delinquent girls members of a deviant subculture? To what degree were they

Introduction and Chapter II (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, rev. ed., 1957).

The complexities involved in attempts to designate human behavior as normal, functional or deviant were succinctly set forth by Woodard:

"Thereby we must also note that 'normal' as statistically (or culturally) defined and as functionally defined, has diverging connotations. Statistical 'normality' may, from the functional approach, mean only mediocrity or even a particularly widespread maladjustment. If everybody had Bright's disease, it would be regarded as normal by the group consensus and it would be normal in the statistical definition. But an incisive functional science would presently still have to recognize it as a pathological condition (as it has with hook-worm, malaria, and other endemic diseases which are statistically normal for their regions), a failure of adjustive appropriateness from the *contained functional approach* of the physiologist. But it requires an autonomic terminology, an intimate knowledge of causal processings, a functional approach, and a sufficiently discrete differentiation of conceptual tools to enable one to state these things." Woodard, *Social Psychology*, TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIOLOGY, 250-251 (Gurvitch & Moore eds., New York, The Philosophical Library, 1945).

More recently, Inkeles and Clinard have respectively surveyed research needs in the fields of social psychology and criminology. Together, these two papers provide a rather adequate framework for research of deviant behavior. Indeed, they indicate that a comprehensive theoretical synthesis is close at hand. Still, as a perusal of these two reviews of research demonstrates, there is yet much to be done before the

alienated from major social values of American society? In what sense were they in rebellion against social norms?

From a more criminological viewpoint, the research is directed toward the behavior pattern accompanying a specific type of delinquency. Following the approach of Clinard and Wade,² a particular type of criminal behavior—female sexual delinquency—is analyzed with respect to definite experiences and social relationships. The tacit assumption that all criminal behavior has a common origin either with regard to rebellion, alienation, differential association or differential identification is not advanced. Rather, it is assumed that deviant and criminal groups may vary in a manner similar to that of nondeviant groups.³ Further, it is posited that determination of the disparate and common characteristics within specific deviant groups as well as among various deviant groups and subcultures is a matter for empirical investigation, not speculation—however sophisticated such speculation may be.⁴

The present study may be conceived, then, as an investigation of the social relationships associated

comprehensive social-psychological model can be incorporated within studies of deviant behavior in something more than a casual manner. Inkeles, *Personality and Social Structure*, and Clinard, *Criminological Research*, *SOCIOLOGY TODAY*, Chs. 11 and 23 (Merton, Broom & Cottrell, Jr., eds., New York, Basic Books, 1959).

² Clinard & Wade, *Toward the Delineation of Vandalism as a Sub-Type in Juvenile Delinquency*, 48 *J. CRIM. L., C. & P.S.* 493 (1958). Other examples of this approach are CRESSEY, *OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY* (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1953); LINDESMITH, *OPIATE ADDICTION* (Bloomington, Indiana, University of Indiana Press, 1947); and SUTHERLAND, *WHITE COLLAR CRIME* (New York, The Dryden Press, 1949).

³ Unquestionably the undue concern with ascertainment of differences between groups—such as delinquents and nondelinquents—has tended to obscure the similarities among various populations as well as variations within groups. Thus, the mere reporting of statistically significant differences between two groups tells us little or nothing of the extent of such differences or their probable sociological or psychological relevance.

⁴ In a recent issue of the *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW* (Vol. 24, No. 2, April 1959), considerable attention was devoted to typology and its relationship to deviant behavior. Admittedly, such typologies as Merton's may have heuristic usefulness—and it would seem that they do. Yet the rather extreme divorcement from existing empirical findings with respect to deviant behavior evident in the formulations of these various and changing schema seem inadvisable and unfortunate. Indeed, much of the discussion of particular types of deviancy (queries, for example in Dubin's article as to whether a particular type-category is *peopled*) smacks of scholasticism. Rather, it would seem we might note the development of typologies in biology or archaeology wherein formulations follow extensive observation and cataloging.

with early sexual promiscuity among delinquent girls. The approach is sociological in that data pertaining to social experiences and relationships are sought rather than data concerning personality structure or early family life. It may therefore be anticipated that the findings will provide evidence of the presence and probable impact of certain social relationships pertaining to early promiscuity, but will not provide comparable psychological data. As a consequence, it will not be possible to assay the respective import of social and psychological factors. It will be possible, however, to delineate the social experiences associated with this type of deviant behavior and to interpret these findings within a sociological framework.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD OF OBTAINING DATA

The primary data was secured through personal interviews with each of 45 delinquent girls at a Southern state reformatory. A prearranged schedule of 60 questions was followed by the interviewer.⁵ The average time for each interview was approximately an hour and a half. All of the interviews were conducted by the junior author during the summer of 1956.

It was decided to employ intensive personal interviews rather than anonymous questionnaires or other paper and pencil means of securing data. It was felt that a focused interview procedure had, among others, the advantage of providing opportunities for clarification of items, elaboration of replies, probing of inconsistent or ambiguous answers, and attempts at dissimulation.⁶

The 45 girls included all girls at the reformatory who were in the fifth grade or above. It was not considered feasible to conduct interviews with those in lower grades because of the large number of mentally retarded girls included among this group. The age range of the 45 girls was from 13 to 20 years with a mean age of 15.8 years. Mean age at time of first commitment was 14.7 years. Median I.Q. of the sample was 77.3 with a range from 50 to 109; no record of an intelligence test was available in four cases. There were 40 white and five Negro girls in the sample.

Concerning place of residence, socio-economic status and marital status of parents, the following

⁵ A copy of this schedule is available upon request.

⁶ The interview procedure was based, to a considerable extent, upon the methodological considerations and suggestions provided by Merton and Kendall in their description of the focused interview. Merton & Kendall, *The Focused Interview*, 51 *Am. J. Soc.* 541 (1946).

information was obtained. Of the 45 girls, 22.2 percent were from metropolitan areas (50,000 population or more), 42.2 percent were from urban, but not metropolitan areas, and 35.6 percent were from rural places of residence (less than 2,500).⁷ Occupational information was incomplete, with 21 of the 45 cases having no information in this regard. This lack of information was related to the prevalence of broken homes. Still, from the available records it was evident that the girls were overwhelmingly from families of low socio-economic status: most of the bread winners were unskilled or semi-skilled workers. With respect to home background, 80 percent of the girls were from homes broken by divorce, separation or death.⁸ In only 20 percent of the cases were the parents married and living together.

Almost all of the 45 girls were apprehended and incarcerated because of sexual misbehavior. Exact figures cannot be given, as in most cases the girls were charged with nonspecific offenses indicating promiscuity. Thus, rebelliousness, truancy or incorrigibility might be recorded, while sexually promiscuous behavior was the actual reason for incarceration. The superintendent estimated that over 90 percent of the girls received at the reformatory have been committed for sexual promiscuity of some sort.⁹

EARLY SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

In the intensive interviews, data was secured with respect to the early sexual experiences and associated dating practices of the 45 girls. From Table 1 it may be noted that sexual intercourse had its beginning between ages 12 and 15 for most of the girls. In two-thirds of the cases the girls said they were on dates at the time virginity was lost. In reply to the question: "Where were you (at the time of first coitus)?" 61 percent of the subjects reported they were in automobiles, 12.5 percent were at girls' homes, and 12.5 percent were out-

⁷ This distribution is not markedly different from that of the state as a whole with regard to metropolitan areas, but the percentage of the delinquents coming from rural areas is considerably less than the percentage of the state's population classified as rural in 1950—63 percent.

⁸ Of the 36 broken homes, 18 of the parents were separated or divorced, 11 of the mothers were widowed, five of the girls were illegitimate children, one of the families was institutionalized, and one's whereabouts was unknown.

⁹ Most female delinquency is associated with sexual misbehavior. Thus Reckless observes that, "The boy is thus the property offender, whereas the girl is the sex offender." RECKLESS, *THE CRIME PROBLEM* 235 (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950).

TABLE 1
AGE AT TIME OF FIRST SEXUAL INTERCOURSE

Age of Delinquent Girl	Number	Percent
9 or 10 years.....	1	2.2
11 years.....	3	6.7
12 years.....	6	13.3
13 years.....	12	26.7
14 years.....	9	20.0
15 years.....	8	17.8
16 years.....	1	2.2
Could not remember.....	1	2.2
No sexual relations.....	4	8.9
Mean Age: 13.3 years		
Total.....	45	100.0

doors.¹⁰ Most of the girls reported that they had been riding around and necking prior to their first sexual intercourse. Further, of those who could remember, approximately half said that there were more than two persons in the group at the time. The principal reason given by the girls for engaging in coitus this first time was that they "liked the boy very much." Two other reasons frequently mentioned were curiosity and the boy's use of force; the latter was mentioned by nine of the 41 girls.¹¹

From Table 2 it is apparent that the first sexual experience of the girls was usually with boys whom they had previously dated. Yet the fact that one-quarter of the girls had not *previously* dated the boys who were their first sexual partners is worthy of note. With respect to subsequent sexual relations, most of the girls had further intercourse within several months. Perhaps surprisingly, as seen in Table 3, sexual intercourse did not become frequent immediately after this loss of virginity; it was some one to six months before most of the girls had further coitus. It may have been that similar circumstances did not soon occur or that

¹⁰ Remaining replies: Other places—4.9 percent, did not remember—9.7 percent; N = 41.

¹¹ Of the 45 girls, 41 had engaged in pre-marital intercourse prior to the time of first incarceration; three of the four who had not engaged in coitus before incarceration did so shortly after first commitment. On this latter point it is pertinent to note that close association with previously promiscuous girls in training schools has been found to induce a compulsion for pre-marital intercourse on the part of those who lacked such experience. See Eissler, *Riots: Observations in a Home for Delinquent Girls*, 3-4 *THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE CHILD* 449 (1949).

TABLE 2

HOW LONG HAD YOU DATED THE BOY WITH WHOM YOU HAD SEXUAL RELATIONS THE FIRST TIME?

Length of Time	Number	Percent of 41
For a year or longer.....	3	7.3
From one to four months.....	5	12.2
"Quite a few dates".....	10	24.4
One to eight dates.....	9	22.0
Never dated him before.....	10	24.4
Did not remember.....	2	4.9
No answer.....	2	4.9
Total.....	41	100.0*

* The underscore indicates that the sum of the column (or columns) above it does not exactly equal the total percentage given due to rounding error.

TABLE 3

WHEN WAS THE NEXT TIME AFTER THIS?

Time Between First and Second Coitus	Number	Percent
Less than one week.....	2	4.9
One to three weeks.....	7	17.1
One to six months.....	18	43.9
Six months to one year.....	9	22.0
No second coitus.....	1	2.4
Cannot remember.....	4	9.8
Total.....	41	100.0

they afterwards experienced guilt or fear. In any event, following this first experience 78 and 81 percent of the 41 girls respectively said that they did not enjoy coitus or that they afterwards felt guilty about their behavior. In reply to the question "Did you think it was wrong?" 68 percent answered yes, they thought sexual intercourse was wrong at the time.

As to the developing pattern of promiscuity following loss of virginity, the girls were questioned about their sexual behavior and dating practices prior to first incarceration. As reported in Table 4, weekly or bimonthly intercourse had become customary for most of the girls. With respect to the promiscuity of this sexual intercourse, the data of Table 5 leads one to the conclusion that most of the sexual experiences were a part of dating. At least the girls held that they *usually* had sexual intercourse only with boys they had dated for some time. Of course, there were exceptions, as the

TABLE 4

HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH BOYS THAT YOU DATE?

Frequency of Coitus	Number	Percent of 41*
Two to four per week.....	17	41.5
One per week to two per month.....	11	26.8
One per month or less.....	13	31.7
Total.....	41	100.0

* The 41 girls tabulated include one girl who had sexual relations after her first incarceration.

TABLE 5

WHO DID YOU HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH?

With Whom	Number	Percent
Always with boys who have dated a long time.....	10	24.4
Usually with boys who have dated a long time.....	27	65.9
With boy friend as well as with his friends.....	1	2.4
No answer.....	3	7.3
Total.....	41	100.0

"usual" versus the "always" replies in Table 5 suggest, and as the interviews revealed. Thus one girl admitted having coitus with several boys in order to please her boy friend. But even in this case sexual intercourse was a part of dating.

A further part of the interview schedule contained items with reference to the girls' opinions of the prevalence of pre-marital sexual behavior. In reply to the question "Do you think most girls have sexual relations with boys they date?" 33 of the 45 girls said that most girls do have sexual relations with the boys they date, eight held that some do, and four stated that only a few girls do so. As to the reasons advanced by the girls as to why girls do have sexual intercourse on dates, almost all (43 of the 45) mentioned that boys expect it. This was the principal reason advanced. Other reasons mentioned were: nothing else to do, for pleasure or fun, they liked the boys real well, they were drinking, would be considered chicken otherwise, and everyone was doing it. These are not mutually exclusive categories, and the several reasons advanced were often similar, yet together they appear to delineate the underlying attitudes of these lower-class girls

toward sexual behavior: sexual intercourse is considered an expected part of dating.

Against this picture of dating behavior in which sexual intercourse is customary may be placed the girls' belief in the rightness or wrongness of pre-marital intercourse. In reply to the question "Are pre-marital sexual relations wrong?," only three girls maintained that such coitus was not wrong. Some 69 percent of the girls said that it was wrong, while 24 percent held that it was sometimes wrong.¹² Thus, most of the girls expressed the opinion that pre-marital coitus was wrong.

By way of recapitulation before turning to an analysis of the research findings, it seems appropriate to delineate the main features of sexual behavior found among the 45 delinquent girls. It may be noted that the girls were socially active from an early age. They were usually engaged in dating behavior by age thirteen. Further, their heterosexual activities took place outside of a home environment. For the most part, when out with boys they spent their time driving around, drinking and looking for excitement. Supervised recreation or activities in which adults played a part apparently held but little interest for them.¹³

Sexual relations were viewed as an ordinary part of dating behavior. From an early age and more or less regularly since, the girls have had sexual intercourse with their boy friends. This intercourse usually takes place in cars and is expected behavior by members of the peer-group.

At the same time, the girls verbally uphold the wrongness of pre-marital sexual relations. Perhaps as a result of this disparity between belief and action, the delinquents attempt to rationalize their behavior by stating that it is the boys who expect and demand sexual intercourse or that they would be considered chicken by their friends if they refused themselves to boys. In any event, the girls clearly uphold the principle of chastity; the fact that their sexual behavior is not in accord with their professed belief does not negate the reality of this belief.¹⁴

¹² The remainder said it was not wrong or that they didn't know.

¹³ A part of the schedule contained items pertaining to recreational preferences and practices.

¹⁴ Whyte's description of pre-marital sex life in Cornerville, a lower-class metropolitan neighborhood, is similar to that reported here in that both patterns involve dating and include a definite disparity between belief and actions. Thus, in Cornerville a well-defined code of sexual conduct exists side-by-side with illicit sexual relations. Whyte, *A Slum Sex Code*, 49 AM. J. Soc. 24 (1943).

The early pattern of delinquent behavior, then, may be delineated as dating behavior which commonly includes sexual intercourse carried on by girls socially active from an early age. The girls are predominantly from broken homes, and their dates usually take place outside of the home. Although the girls maintain that sexual intercourse is a customary part of dating behavior and that they have repeatedly engaged in such behavior, still they nevertheless express the conviction that pre-marital sexual relations are wrong and should be punished.

DISCUSSION

In previous research the inverse relationship of pre-marital coitus to socio-economic status has been reported. Thus, Hollingshead,¹⁵ Holman and Schaffner,¹⁶ Kinsey,¹⁷ and Nye¹⁸ all report that pre-marital sexual relations are more common among lower-class subjects than among those of higher status. With respect to incarcerated female delinquents the incidence and frequency of pre-marital coitus is markedly greater than that reported for nondelinquent populations.¹⁹ Indeed, sexual promiscuity and its attendant conflicts with parental and community authority remain as the most conspicuous immediate cause of delinquency among girls.²⁰

Three general etiological explications of sexual delinquency among lower-class girls may be analyzed with respect to the present findings. First, there is the contention that such deviancy is the outcome of personality inadequacies or de-

¹⁵ HOLLINGSHEAD, *ELMTOWN'S YOUTH* Ch. 16 (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1949).

¹⁶ Holman P. Schaffner, *The Sex Lives of Unmarried Men*, 52 AM. J. Soc. 501 (1947).

¹⁷ KINSEY *et al.*, *SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE HUMAN FEMALE passim* (Philadelphia, W. B. Saunders & Co., 1953).

¹⁸ NYE, *FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR* 26 (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1959).

¹⁹ Thus, the Gluecks found in their study of female delinquents that 98.3 per cent had engaged in illicit sexual behavior prior to incarceration. GLUECK, S. & E., *FIVE HUNDRED DELINQUENT WOMEN 89-90*, 231 (New York, Alfred H. Knopf, 1934). In a more recent British study, only 15 percent of 300 Borstal girls were found to be virga intacta. Epps, *A Further Survey of Female Delinquents Undergoing Borstal Training*, 4 BRITISH JOURNAL OF DELINQUENCY 267 (1953-54).

²⁰ For a discussion of the various motivational factors associated with competitive dating patterns among adolescent girls in contemporary America, see Parsons, *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States*, *ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY* 89-103 (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1954).

ficiencies.²¹ This approach falls most properly within a psychological framework. Second, there is the differential association hypothesis: girls become delinquent because they are a part of a deviant group which teaches and perpetuates delinquent behavior patterns.²² And third, there are various theoretical formulations which hold that sexual delinquency as well as many other types of deviant behavior are the end result of inconsistencies or conflicts in the dominant value system which produce conflict, rebellion or alienation on the part of individuals or groups.²³

The present findings most evidently support the differential association position. The delinquent girls were actively and continuously engaged in an adolescent subculture in which sexual intercourse was regarded as an expected part of the dating pattern. Although they did not approve of pre-marital coitus in the abstract (they said that it was wrong), in the immediacy of peer-group dating they followed group expectations and practices. It may be said with some certainty, then, that prior social relationships within adolescent groups in which sexual intercourse was an integral part of the dating pattern led to the incarceration of these delinquent girls. Differential association was certainly a necessary, if not sufficient, antecedent to sexual delinquency among these girls.

Acceptance of the differential association explanation in no way negates or refutes the possible etiological importance of psychological factors or value-system explanations, for as Dubin has recently observed,²⁴ descriptions of deviant social relationships do not in themselves explain why and how such behavior commenced. Hence, the question of why individual girls joined heterosexual adolescent groups in which pre-marital coitus was expected remains to be answered. In addition, the inception, existence and perpetuation of deviant

subcultures must be accounted for. Both of these questions, which involve psychological and social system analysis, go beyond the differential association formulation.

Still, it is relevant to relate the present empirical findings to a more comprehensive social action framework in several regards, especially in view of the fact that the crucial problem is the articulation of psychological, social psychological and sociological data. With respect to psychological factors, it was found that the 45 girls were below average in their performance on intelligence tests and predominantly came from broken homes. It is pertinent to note, in addition, that the early sexual experiences were part of group behavior patterns among these lower-class adolescents. The detailed interviews failed to give support to the contention that pre-marital coitus was accompanied by unusual circumstances or pathological behavior. Rather, early sexual intercourse was found to be part of an adolescent dating pattern among these lower-class girls.

With respect to subcultural or deviant group analyses, the present findings lend some support to those who would question the relationship of value-system orientations to deviant behavior, at least insofar as it be assumed that delinquency is directly associated with a rejection of middle-class values in American society.²⁵ The subjects in the present study consistently indicated their knowledge of middle-class sexual norms and acknowledged the social undesirability of their promiscuous behavior. Yet the fact is that middle-class morality was ineffective within the lower-class adolescent subculture. The present findings support the position that the relationship of value-orientations to deviant behavior is not rationalistic: that delinquent girls do not violate social norms because they are ignorant of or hostile to these norms. Rather, it appears that they are motivated toward deviant behavior by a desire to maintain status within their adolescent subculture.

²¹ For a review of this approach see VOLD, *THEORETICAL CRIMINOLOGY* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1958).

²² SUTHERLAND & CRESSEY, *PRINCIPLES OF CRIMINOLOGY* Ch. 4 (New York, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955).

²³ One of the leading expositions of this viewpoint is found in TAFT, *CRIMINOLOGY* Ch. 18 (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1950).

²⁴ Dubin, *Deviant Behavior and Social Structure*, 24 *Am. Soc. Rev.* 164 (1959).

²⁵ This contention is advanced by Cohen with respect to lower-class delinquent boys in metropolitan areas. COHEN, *DELINQUENT BOYS* (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1955). He does not, however, contend that female, middle-class or rural delinquents have similar value-orientations.