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THE MALEVOLENT TRANSFORMATION

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The "malevolent transformation" describes what some have felt to be a psychodynamic event which occurs in the early lives of emotionally deprived children and results in anti-social patterns of behavior. Is there evidence supporting the existence of the malevolent transformation? If it does occur, at what ages is it manifest? What is the course of its development? And what hopes are there for its arrest or correction? In the following article, the author reports upon a study of 30 pre-delinquent boys and 30 matched non-pre-delinquents, in which study the author considers evidence of the transformation to have been uncovered. He discusses the theory of the malevolent transformation and compares the theory with his findings.—EDITOR.

The concept of the "malevolent transformation," as developed by Sullivan,¹ seems to possess considerable merit in explaining the hardening of anti-social patterns within the personality structure. While it may well be true that much of delinquency-in-general is derived from the interweaving of a number of social, cultural, and economic factors, attention must not be deflected from critical psychodynamic factors in the case of the delinquent-in-particular. The "malevolent transformation" is one such factor the psychogenetic outcome of which may help to imprint anti-social patterns of reaction upon the future criminal. The results of a research, already reported upon from a different perspective by the present writer,² seem to support the existence of

¹ SULLIVAN, *THE INTERPERSONAL THEORY OF PSYCHIATRY* (1953); MULLAHY, *OEDIPUS MYTH AND COMPLEX* 304 (1948). Chapter 10 of the latter reference is a primary source for Sullivan's views as accounted for by Mullahy on p. 129: "Some of the material . . . has never been published and is taken from lectures given by Sullivan . . . during . . . 1947-1948, and from conversations between Sullivan and the writer."

² The present article develops some ideas suggested by the author in previous research. More details of this research are available in the original manuscript, *A Study of the Relationship Between Boys' Perception of Parental Attitudes and Their Predelinquency* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Education, New York University, 1956). Also see a digest of this study, *Perceived Parental Attitudes and Predelinquency*, 49 J. CRIM. L., C. & P.S. 116 (1958).

the "malevolent transformation" and to shed some light upon its development. Objective testing methods were used to uncover attitudes at two levels of awareness within the subjects.

According to Sullivan, a chronically hostile mother induces in her child an intense and more or less chronic anxiety. In addition, she fails to give him tenderness—"a deprivation which will have fateful consequences for his future well-being and happiness."³ As he becomes increasingly aware of the significant people about him, the child learns to focus upon behavior which will win their approval with its accompanying rewards and tenderness, and to escape punishment and disapproval. He learns to perceive himself as "good-me" when he experiences approval, tenderness, and good feelings, and "bad-me" when he experiences disapproval and anxiety. It is on account of this learning process that his earliest years have the greatest bearing on his future life. Of necessity, the child accepts uncritically the attitudes, codes, and behavior of his parents and their surrogates. He acquires a respecting and loving attitude toward himself if the significant people in his life are respecting and loving toward him.

"If they are derogatory and hateful, then he will acquire a derogatory and hateful attitude

³ MULLAHY, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 293.

toward himself. Throughout life, save perhaps for the intervention of extraordinary circumstances and allowing for some modification through later experience, he will carry the attitudes towards himself he learned early in life around with him just as surely as he will carry his own skin."⁴

When certain of his impulses cannot be openly manifested, lest they provoke retaliatory disapproval, the child may integrate them in such a way as to find camouflaged release, so that no anxiety ensues. Since this, the technique of sublimation, is not always possible, the child may regress or, if he is chronically rebuffed by his parents in his search for tenderness, undergo "a malevolent transformation" of personality. In this manner, the awareness of a need for tenderness becomes associated with rebuff; "bad-me" is thereby exhibited when a need for tenderness is experienced. Furthermore, since "bad-me" is accompanied by feelings of disapproval and consequent anxiety, the child eventually experiences anxiety any time a need for tenderness arises. Moreover, the child may momentarily subdue his anxiety with anger, thus becoming poised to strike back with his own hostility against the hostile anxiety-provocations of his parents. He feels constantly endangered and refuses while growing up to risk the anxiety attendant upon the expression of tenderness in any fashion at all.⁵

Beyond Sullivan's fundamental statement on the transformation, based upon his extensive psychiatric experience and observation, there is little evidence for its support. Suggestions occur here and there tending to confirm it at different points, but an approach with objective testing methods is conspicuously absent.

Sullivan in his discussion points out that the child learns that it is "highly disadvantageous to show any need for tender cooperation from authoritative figures about him in which case he shows something else: and that something else is the basic malevolent attitude, the attitude that one really lives among enemies . . . And on that basis . . . later in life . . . the juvenile makes it practically impossible for anyone to feel tenderly towards him or to treat him kindly; he beats them to it, so to speak, by the display of his attitude."⁶

It would thus seem that the "malevolent transformation" may produce anti-social activity when

the child encounters "derogatory and hateful" attitudes in his parents. That such attitudes have been encountered by serious delinquents seems borne out by the observations of Redl and Wine-
man,⁷ who noted in the group they studied "both conscious and unconscious rejection" by parents. Similar observations on an empirical basis were made by Bowlby,⁸ Clothier,⁹ Kanner,¹⁰ and Wol-
berg.¹¹

In all of these instances, it seemed highly probable that children as severely traumatized as these very aggressive delinquents had been would have found it unbearably painful to admit that anybody felt tenderly toward them, or that they, in turn, could feel tenderly toward anybody else.

Bloch,¹² who has had considerable experience in the treatment of delinquents, gives further support to Sullivan's point of view. He starts with the premise that the delinquent deals with his anxiety by causing others to respond in a similar manner to his parental figures. These responses typically have been rejection and punishment. Bloch pushes on to propose that the reason why this mode persists is that it prevents the emergence of dependency needs which for the delinquent are dangerous and anxiety-producing. Since these dependency feelings are too hard to cope with and intimacy produces panic, the delinquent persists in his hostile ways. Extrapolating beyond Bloch's actual statement, one might say that in this way the "malevolent transformation" among delinquents becomes even more fixed, i.e., the repression of dependency needs hastens the process.

With these considerations in mind, it would seem that the course of the "malevolent transformation," at least insofar as it eventuates in openly anti-social behavior, could perhaps best be traced through an examination of the life histories of a group of delinquents. Comparing this group with a control group of normal children would, of course, be essential for the establishment of differences which might be significant. Another possibility exists, however, not for establishing

⁷ REDL & WINEMAN, *CHILDREN WHO HATE* (1951).

⁸ Bowlby, *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves: Their Character and Home Life*, 25 INT'L J. PSYCHOANAL. 19, 107 (1944).

⁹ Clothier, *The Treatment of the Rejected Child*, 3 NERV. CHILD 89 (1944).

¹⁰ Kanner, *The Role of the School in the Treatment of Rejected Children*, 3 NERV. CHILD 228 (1944).

¹¹ Wolberg, *The Character Structure of the Rejected Child*, 3 NERV. CHILD 74 (1944).

¹² Bloch, *Some Concepts in the Treatment of Delinquency*, 1 CHILDREN 49 (No. 2 1954).

⁴ *Id.* at 298.

⁵ SULLIVAN, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 214.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the transformation but, at least, for supporting its presence. This would consist in observing the status of the presumed transformation among different groups ranged along the continuum of anti-sociality.

Presumably, among relatively socialized persons, the "malevolent transformation" will not have occurred and, hence, one may assume that this group will manifest attitudes which consistently reflect a feeling of acceptance at all levels of awareness: that is to say that both consciously and unconsciously such persons will generally feel accepted. On the other hand, one may assume that very serious delinquents, such as those described by Redl and Wineman,¹³ Bowlby,¹⁴ etc., will manifest attitudes consistently reflecting a feeling of rejection at all levels, both conscious and unconscious. While the attitudes of these two groups would be susceptible of measurement, they would still fail to give evidence of the point of change-over, i.e., where the individual begins to feel that he is hated, begins to feel more comfortable in being hated, and also begins to perceive others as hateful. Furthermore, there should presumably be a time when there is not so much consistency at both levels, whether of acceptance or rejection.

For this purpose, a critical group is one beginning to get involved in anti-social activity. A good choice would consist of early delinquent or pre-delinquent youngsters; the latter is precisely the experimental population studied in this research.¹⁵

In the case of a pre-delinquent group of this type, one would expect the "malevolent transformation" to be at a transitional stage in development, and the results of this study indicate that this is indeed the case. Not only behavior, but also attitudes would be transitional. The attitudes of such a group have been investigated in this study.

PROCEDURE

In this study, a group of 30 pre-delinquent boys were compared with a similar group of non-pre-delinquents in their perception of the parental attitudes toward them of possessiveness, dominating and ignoring, at two levels of awareness.

Shoben¹⁶ has defined these terms in the follow-

¹³ REDL & WINEMAN, *op. cit. supra* note 7.

¹⁴ Bowlby, *supra* note 8.

¹⁵ Chwast, *op. cit. supra* note 2.

¹⁶ Shoben, *The Assessment of Parental Attitudes in Relation to Child Adjustment*, 39 GENET. PSYCHOL. MONOGR. 129 (1949).

ing manner: *Dominating* is a tendency on the part of the parent to put the child in a subordinate role, to take him into account quite fully, but always as one who should conform to parental wishes under penalty of severe punishment. *Possessive* is the tendency on the part of the parent to "baby" the child, to emphasize unduly the affectional bond between parent and child, to value highly the child's dependency on the parent, and to restrict the child's activities to those which can be carried on in the family group. *Ignoring* is the tendency on the part of the parent to disregard the child as an individual member of the family, to regard the "good" child as one who demands the least parental time, and to disclaim responsibility for the child's behavior.

Such differences as existed between the two groups were determined for their expressed attitudes about mothers, fathers, and parents in general; their underlying attitudes about mothers and fathers; and the discrepancy between their expressed and underlying attitudes about mothers and fathers. Furthermore, since these attitudes were seen as relative rather than absolute, it was appreciated that varying amounts of each of the attitudes could be manifested by each subject.

As many relevant factors as could be dealt with were controlled. Hence, all of the boys were between 12 and 16 years of age, with an experimental mean age of 13.03 and control mean of 12.98 years. The mean school grade was 7.5 years for the experimentals and 7.2 years for the controls. Also, no intelligence quotient was below 80, the mean for the experimentals being 88.6, that for the controls 90.0. No boy had any serious physical defect or organic brain pathology. In addition, the natural parents of all subjects were alive, residing at home, and had been in this country for at least eight years.

Both groups came from similar socially and economically depressed areas and were relatively comparable for ethnic background and fathers' occupations.

The pre-delinquent subjects had all been reported to the police authorities for at least one rather serious offense, or for two or more trivial offenses. However, they had never been arrested, detained, institutionalized, or considered as school problems.

The subjects were tested by two techniques. The first was the Child-Parent Relationship Scale, a questionnaire of the "disguised structured" type

as described by Campbell,¹⁷ which contained 64 items. This questionnaire probed the more consciously held attitudes of the boys regarding dominating, possessive, or ignoring attitudes of the father, the mother, and of parents in general.

The second test consisted of eight projective thematic pictures. Six of them were borrowed from the Thematic Apperception Test,¹⁸ one from Symonds' Picture Story Test,¹⁹ and the last from Stern's Adaptation of the TAT.²⁰ This test was scored for the same attitudes as the C-P.R.S. with reference only to the mother and father.

A split-half reliability coefficient of .80, probable error of plus or minus .05, was obtained for the C-P.R.S. The mean of the correlations between two judges for all variables in the projective thematic pictures was .74.

The assumptions that the Child-Parent Relationship Scale yielded expressed or more overt attitudes primarily and the projective thematic pictures yielded underlying or deeper level attitudes led to the further logical assumption that a comparison of the results of the two tests would give a differential perspective on the subjects' reactions and attitudes. Thus, one could observe the subjects' reactions at different levels of awareness, since in the case of the C-P.R.S. the responses would be expressed or more concealable, and for the thematic pictures, underlying or less concealable.

After computing the means and standard deviations for each variable, the significance of the differences between the research groups was determined. This was accomplished by use of the *t* test in comparing upper level perceptions, one with the other, and then lower level perceptions, one with the other. In determining the consistency of upper-lower level perceptions between the groups, the "median-test," a non-parametric technique, was employed. A five per cent level of confidence was considered significant.

RESULTS

The scores attained by the predelinquent boys on the Child-Parent Relationship Scale are summarized by the means and standard deviations

¹⁷ Campbell, *The Indirect Assessment of Social Attitudes*, 47 *PSYCHOL. BULL.* 15 (1950).

¹⁸ MURRAY, *EXPLORATIONS IN PERSONALITY* (1938).

¹⁹ SYMONDS, *ADOLESCENT FANTASY* (1949).

²⁰ Stern, *A Study of the Relationship Between Attitudes Toward Certain Authority Figures and Job Stability* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Education, New York University, 1951).

TABLE I
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND RANGES ON
C-P.R.S. FOR PREDELINQUENTS

Category	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dominating Mother.....	2.5	5.04	-12 to +10
Dominating Father.....	.7	4.66	-12 to +8
Possessive Mother.....	1.5	3.57	-7 to +8
Possessive Father.....	1.1	3.77	-7 to +9
Ignoring Mother.....	.3	4.17	-9 to +10
Ignoring Father.....	.3	4.57	-8 to +8

TABLE II
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND RANGES ON
C-P.R.S. FOR NON-PREDELINQUENTS

Category	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dominating Mother.....	3.0	3.65	-6 to +8
Dominating Father.....	-2.1	2.29	-7 to +3
Possessive Mother.....	-.7	3.28	-7 to +5
Possessive Father.....	-1.4	3.72	-9 to +5
Ignoring Mother.....	-4.1	3.52	-10 to +5
Ignoring Father.....	-3.2	2.84	-8 to +4

TABLE III
t VALUES AND LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE ON C-P.R.S.

Category	<i>t</i> -Value	Level of Confidence
Dominating Mother.....	.43	—
Dominating Father.....	2.90	1% ^a
Possessive Mother.....	2.38	5% ^a
Possessive Father.....	2.53	2% ^a
Ignoring Mother.....	4.28	1% ^a
Ignoring Father.....	3.51	1% ^a

^a Indicates that the mean is greater for predelinquents.

for each variable in Table I. For convenience sake the ranges are also presented in the table.

The same data for the non-predelinquent boys are presented in Table II.

The results of the application of the *t* test for the significance of the differences between the means for each category on the Child-Parent Relationship Scale are seen in Table III. It can be observed that the predelinquents stated that they had more dominating fathers, more possessive mothers and fathers, and more ignoring mothers and fathers.

The scores of the predelinquent boys on the

TABLE IV
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND RANGES ON
PROJECTIVE THEMATIC PICTURES FOR
PREDELINQUENTS

Category	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dominating Mother.....	8.8	5.87	0 to 24
Dominating Father.....	11.3	5.31	3 to 19
Possessive Mother.....	5.7	3.46	0 to 13
Possessive Father.....	5.3	3.42	0 to 14
Ignoring Mother.....	6.9	4.47	0 to 18
Ignoring Father.....	5.4	3.76	0 to 12

TABLE V
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND RANGES ON
PROJECTIVE THEMATIC PICTURES FOR
NON-PREDELINQUENTS

Category	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dominating Mother.....	6.5	5.43	0 to 20
Dominating Father.....	9.3	4.51	0 to 22
Possessive Mother.....	9.3	3.95	1 to 14
Possessive Father.....	8.5	3.88	1 to 15
Ignoring Mother.....	1.9	1.50	0 to 5
Ignoring Father.....	1.7	2.53	0 to 13

TABLE VI
t VALUES AND LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE ON PROJECTIVE
THEMATIC PICTURES

Category	<i>t</i> -Value	Level of Confidence
Dominating Mother.....	1.55	—
Dominating Father.....	1.54	—
Possessive Mother.....	3.72	1% ^a
Possessive Father.....	3.31	1% ^a
Ignoring Mother.....	5.71	1% ^b
Ignoring Father.....	4.36	1% ^b

^a Indicates mean is greater for non-predelinquents.

^b Indicates mean is greater for preelinquents.

projective thematic pictures are summarized by the means, standard deviations, and ranges for each variable in Table IV.

Similar data are presented for the non-predelinquent boys in Table V.

The *t* test results for the significance of differences of the means for these two sets of data on the projective thematic pictures are given in Table VI. These results, presumed to give evidence of deeper level attitudes, show that the preelin-

TABLE VII
SIGNIFICANCE OF DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN C-P.R.S.
AND PROJECTIVE THEMATIC PICTURE SCORES

Category	Value of Chi-Square	Level of Con- fidence	Group with Larger Discrepancy
Dominating Mother.....	.04	—	—
Dominating Father.....	3.47	10%	Control
Possessive Mother.....	6.94	1%*	Experi- mental
Possessive Father.....	7.97	1%*	Experi- mental
Ignoring Mother.....	2.00	20%	Control
Ignoring Father.....	5.55	2%*	Control

* Statistically significant.

quents perceived their mothers and fathers as less possessive and more ignoring.

Finally, it would appear from Table VII, summarizing discrepancies between expressed level and underlying level attitude data, that the preelinquents were less consistent than the non-predelinquents in their expressed attitudes as compared to their deeper feelings about mothers' and fathers' possessiveness, and more consistent at both levels about being ignored by the father. There was no difference between the groups for dominating attitudes.

DISCUSSION

If the results of the study are assumed to be valid, the material derived from the expressed level attitude instrument (C-P.R.S.) seems particularly significant in delineating the status of the malevolent transformation. Surprisingly, the preelinquent, more than the non-predelinquent, openly stated that his mother and father were possessive toward him. This finding ran contrary to what had been hypothesized, since it had been expected that he would say that he felt that they were less possessive toward him.

The projective test results, measuring deeper level attitudes, indicated that his deeper feelings about his mother and father, more often than those of the non-predelinquent, were that they felt less possessive toward him than did the non-predelinquent, as had been hypothesized.

It is this inconsistency in the preelinquent's attitude that seems to uncover the pathogenic process underlying the malevolent transformation. This lack of consistency might be interpreted as reflecting the incomplete inroads upon the pre-

delinquent's functioning which parental rejection has made. He already seems to perceive this rejection at a deeper level of awareness and also seems to be reacting behaviorally (witness his predelinquency), but he is not prepared to face this entirely at the overt level.

The expressed statement about possessiveness may, in a sense, be an open acknowledgement by the boy that he needs and wants tenderness. However, because he may strongly sense that he cannot expect such a demonstration of positive feelings from his parents, he seems to have already less consciously consolidated his defenses against rejection and hostility.

One may further theorize that were the transformation completed—that is, if the boy was fully convinced that he was hated and hateful—he would not even dare to hope, as evidenced by his expressed verbal statement, that his parents regarded him with affection. In short, the parent would no longer be perceived as being possessive to any degree whatsoever, as measured by the expressed attitude scale. Put otherwise, the course of the transformation would have proceeded from the status of the predelinquent, in which his open assertion of parental concern is tantamount to a "methinks the man doth protest too much" type of overcompensation, to the status of the confirmed delinquent who simply doesn't give a hang.

It should be noted that the average age of the boys in this study was about 13 and hence essentially in the early adolescent period. This age is beyond the childhood era, when Sullivan²¹ presumed that the malevolent transformation manifested itself, and it is also beyond the juvenile era, when Sullivan presumed that the transformation reached its "ubiquitous termination."

One would therefore have to assume, to be consistent with Sullivan's thinking on growth stages, that these boys now manifested the end-product of the malevolent transformation so far as it would progress with them, in that it had become relatively fixed in their character structures. In view of this, then, one could also assume that had

the malevolence proceeded further (for example, to the stage which it might have reached with the type of serious delinquent described by Bowlby,²² Redl and Wineman,²³ etc.), it would have become fixed during the childhood and/or juvenile period, and we would now be observing the results of a phenomenon relatively inactive at this time.

Another possible view is that the malevolent transformation is a process extending through time and not limited to the childhood and juvenile periods. This would mean that we are observing in the predelinquent an intermediate stage of the transformation which may still proceed toward further development and resolution.

According to this view, one can agree with Sullivan that the chronically hostile mother can create anxiety within the child. This anxiety may, in turn, be converted into hostility by the child as he "beats the adult to it." With repeated small conversions of parental hostility into child hostility by this formula, a major disastrous personality development, the "malevolent transformation," becomes possible. The present study hopefully suggests, however, that since the transformation may be incomplete at the early adolescent period, if the hostility of significant adults diminishes, the malevolence manifested by the boys may be dissolved, and predelinquency may never be the precursor to more serious forms of anti-social behavior.

SUMMARY

In a study comparing 30 predelinquent boys with an equated group of non-predelinquent boys, in the perception of parental attitudes, at two levels of awareness, support is suggested for the validity of Sullivan's concept of the "malevolent transformation."

Predelinquent boys showed both behavior and attitudes which appeared to be transitional between what might be expected from non-predelinquents (presumably socialized boys), on one hand, and from serious delinquents, on the other.

²² Bowlby, *supra* note 8.

²³ REDL & WINEMAN, *op. cit. supra* note 7.

²¹ SULLIVAN, *op. cit. supra* note 1.