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OVERSENSITIVITY AND PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG MALE DELINQUENTS

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Persons who have contact with delinquent boys often report their impression that these youngsters are overly sensitive and take offense and anger easily. In other areas, however, they are seen as manifesting fairly high degrees of personal stability, i.e., they are self-confident, lacking in self-pity, and not overly anxious individuals.

In this investigation, we have attempted to determine the presence of these factors in a population of delinquent youths and the relationship of these personality traits to recidivism.

The population studied consisted of 100 white youths, 16-17 years of age, who were first commitments to a progressive, public correctional facility.

The boys were tested with an adaptation of the Neuropsychiatric Screening Adjunct¹ both prior to their arrival at the institution and immediately after being released by the facility. This instrument experienced wide use during World War II and contains 11 sub-scales, including scales relating to oversensitivity and personal stability. The test is a paper and pencil one which is normally self-administered unless the respondent experiences difficulty in answering the test items.

Oversensitivity is determined by the presence of such traits as irritability, quickness to take offense, resentment of criticism, etc. Personal adjustment is indicated by such characteristics as self-assurance, lack of depression, and a non-anxious personality.

One of the advantages that attends the use of the Neuropsychiatric Screening Adjunct is that cross sectional male distributions are available for each of the sub-scales, although these distributions are for a somewhat older male population. Nevertheless, this does allow for some tentative comparisons between male delinquents on these traits and a cross section of the male population.

Our data indicate that 40 per cent of the youths

who entered the facility could be described as oversensitive, while only 19 per cent of a cross sectional male population could be similarly described. The difference is significant at the one per cent level of chance indicating that a significantly larger percentage of delinquent youths entering the institution could be pictured as oversensitive.

These are boys who feel that they have hot tempers, that people hurt their feelings often, and, consequently, that many of their anti-social actions are justified. Quite often these youngsters will go out of their way to make things difficult and unpleasant for those they dislike. These youths are somewhat difficult to supervise because they do not like to be told what to do and they will often act completely contrary to instructions. These traits often get them into difficulty with youth and probation authorities as well as with institutional personnel.

At the treatment facility, the boys were often suspicious of the supervisory personnel and the other boys with whom they came in contact. They felt that most persons were taking advantage of them because they did not know the "ropes." Many of the boys said that their judges and probation officers had been unnecessarily harsh with them. They pointed to others who had received probation for the same offense, forgetting that they may have had their share of probation experiences. It was often quite difficult to reach these boys because of the techniques they employed to distort reality in favor of their own need systems.

In many other areas, however, these boys appeared to be fairly stable kinds of youths. They reported themselves to be in good spirits most of the time, rarely blue or depressed, non-worriers, and they took a fairly optimistic view of the future. In terms of these traits, 93 per cent of the boys entering the facility evidenced a high degree of personal adjustment on the Neuropsychiatric Screening Adjunct as compared with 70 per cent of a male cross sectional population. The difference

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¹4 STOFFER, GUTTMAN, SUCHMAN, LAZARSFELD, STAR & CLAUSEN, STUDIES ON SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY DURING WORLD WAR II at 486 *et seq.* (1950).

between the two distributions is significant at the one per cent level.

Most of these boys were gang delinquents and came from highly delinquent areas where they could be described as having value and action systems which were not too unlike those of their contemporaries. These were youngsters who often appeared to have made a somewhat dispassionate adjustment to the world and who assumed a fairly laissez-faire attitude toward people and things in general. The writer is inclined to say that because of this attitude, in part, these boys were not anxiety prone and, indeed, our data indicated that these boys evidenced a particularly small number of psychosomatic complaints. These attitudes, however, do occasion difficulties when the boys have to assume responsibilities in such areas as marriage, employment, etc.

When the two factors were used in combination, we found that 35 per cent of the boys admitted to the institution could be described as oversensitive but otherwise personally adjusted; 58 per cent of the youths were personally adjusted and not oversensitive; 5 per cent were oversensitive and evidenced a low level of personal adjustment; 2 per cent were not oversensitive and evidenced a low level of personal adjustment.

The boys who were oversensitive and personally adjusted proved to be the most difficult to work with. Their behavioral patterns were fairly well ingrained; they rationalized their difficulties with others and they were difficult to reach and persuade. Much of what was constructive in the treatment program was brushed aside and eluded them "as water rolls off the back of a duck."

The boys were again tested upon their release from the facility and, as a group, these first commitments experienced a recidivist rate of 18 per cent as indicated by their eventual reinstitutionalization. Oversensitivity and personal adjustment appear to have an effect on the recidivist rates of the boys who were studied.

An oversensitive boy had a greater chance of becoming a recidivist. We found that 11 per cent of the boys who were not oversensitive upon their release became recidivists, while the rate was three times as high for the group of boys who were oversensitive, i.e., 33 per cent were failures.

Our follow-up investigations indicated that boys who were oversensitive upon release had greater difficulty in finding and holding jobs, they often argued with their families and peers, were

often involved in physical assaults, and related poorly to their supervising officers. They made an unfavorable initial impression upon their officers and one which, unfortunately, found mutual reinforcement from both parties.

Boys who verbalized statements indicating that they had a high degree of personal adjustment upon release appeared to have greater chances of becoming recidivists than those who verbalized the opposite kind of statements. None of the seven boys who manifested a low degree of personal adjustment failed, while approximately 20 per cent of the 93 boys who evidenced a high degree of personal adjustment failed. Our data indicated that while a low degree of personal adjustment may differentiate between those who do and do not become recidivists, the presence of a high degree of personal adjustment is not a discriminating factor since this tended to approximate the over-all institutional recidivist rate.

The evidence indicates that, in general, boys who left the facility expressing some uncertainty about themselves and the world that they were going to interact in seemed to experience a better chance of success than boys who were content with themselves when they left the institution. One might hypothesize that boys who are content with themselves are less likely to alter their behavioral patterns.

Boys who were both oversensitive and personally adjusted had considerably less chance of succeeding after their release from the institution than boys who were not oversensitive and personally adjusted. Thirty-nine per cent of the youths who were oversensitive and personally adjusted became recidivists, while only 10 per cent of the boys who were not oversensitive, but personally adjusted, became recidivists. Where oversensitivity or lack of oversensitivity was found with a low level of personal adjustment, none of the boys became recidivists. The numbers in the last two categories are so small, however, as not to allow for any generalizations.

In summary, therefore, we have shown that oversensitivity and personal adjustment are important factors to consider in the treatment and study of the juvenile delinquent. In comparison with a male cross sectional population, a significantly larger percentage of delinquent boys in our study could be described as being oversensitive, non-worriers, and somewhat detached kinds of youths. Boys who were very sensitive

had a better chance of recidivating than those who were not oversensitive. Youths who were somewhat lacking in self-confidence and anxious about their adjustment to the world had a better chance of succeeding after their release than boys who had the opposite kinds of characteristics.

In terms of an institutional program, it would seem wise to give these characteristics some concern. Certainly, too, much can be done to aid the youth after he leaves the institution. With increased insight into himself and others, the oversensitive delinquent may be helped to adjust to others. While one may not succeed in changing this type of youth in any basic sense, it is often possible to negate the anti-social action components which may accompany this type of orientation to the world.

After investigating the personal adjustment factors, we think it valid to reiterate the often made comment that perhaps too much time is spent adjusting boys to the institution and not enough energies are devoted to giving youths a realistic appreciation of the problems that they must face in adjusting to the world outside of the correctional facility. While the boys should not be traumatized before their release, it would seem to be to their advantage if they are concerned with the adjustment they must make during this period.

There remains much to be done in this area in terms of learning how widespread these traits are in other criminal populations, how causal they may be to certain types of criminal behavior, and in determining the most effective ways of embodying these findings within a therapeutic program.