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## THE ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION IN CONDITIONING PUBLIC ATTITUDE TOWARD THE OFFENDER

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In this article, which is based upon a paper presented at the Fifth International Criminological Congress at Montreal, in 1965, Dr. Dow suggests that the negative attitude of the public toward the offender is the result of a failure in identification between the two. This assumption was tested by measuring the ability of 549 students to identify with delinquency and adult criminality. Their ability to do so was extremely limited, and provided presumptive evidence that this breakdown in identification had conditioned public attitude toward the offender. This finding suggests the need to know more about public attitude and the role played by identification in conditioning this attitude.

Much is said in criminology about the negative attitude of the public toward the offender,<sup>1</sup> but very little is offered by way of systematic explanation. To account for this attitude, the following hypothesis is advanced; that the public's attitude toward the offender is a function of the level of identification existing between the two. To test this hypothesis, some measure is required to indicate the extent to which the public can identify with either the delinquent or the adult offender. If such measurement is possible, and if the level of identification is low, it would be possible to suggest that this factor functions as an independent variable, influencing public attitude and hence action.

This paper presents the results of the measurement of two dimensions of identification. It also explores the relationship between the level of identification and the level of information. Similarly, the connections between information and "action" and between identification and "action" are examined; namely, can a high level of information be assumed to result in a high motivation to action and, at the same time, what influence does the level of identification exert on the level of action?

In general, we would anticipate a low level of identification and a general unwillingness to act in support of criminological research. Both findings would be quite consistent with the public's attitude toward the offender. Finally, modification of this attitude—through greater identification—could perhaps be expected as the student's knowledge of criminology increased.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, RECKLESS, *THE CRIME PROBLEM* 374 (1961).

### METHOD

The concept of identification contains many dimensions which must be separated if any systematic results are to be obtained. For present purposes, the following levels were selected: (1) the empathy dimension, or the possibility of imagining oneself in the position of another; and (2) the sympathy dimension, or the capacity to feel sympathy for another.<sup>2</sup>

While our primary interest was in the "public's" reaction to these concepts, vis-à-vis the areas of delinquency and adult criminality, the analysis of this relationship in isolation was not methodologically desirable, i.e., the obvious difficulty of asking a respondent how much sympathy he feels for a delinquent, an adult criminal, etc. A ranking procedure was therefore used, in which the respondent was asked to rank eight conditions. The conditions were held constant, but the wording varied from one dimension to the other. The two items were as follows:

#### Item I

Order the following circumstances on the basis of the ease or difficulty you have in imagining yourself in the various situations.

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| (A) Living in a condition of poverty. | (D) Being the victim of a criminal or delinquent act. |
|---------------------------------------|---|

<sup>2</sup> The following definition is typical and contains the basic concepts selected for analysis: "The term identification is loosely used to sum up a number of different ways in which one person puts himself in the place of another. People are said to identify with others when they are able to feel sympathy for another's plight, to understand and perhaps even experience the emotions someone else is experiencing. . . ." (BROOM & SELZNICK, *SOCIOLOGY* 89-90 (1958).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (B) Being sick.                              | (E) Living in a time of global war.             |
| (B') Being the parent of a child who is sick | (F) Being a criminal.                           |
| (C) Being the parent of a delinquent child.  | (G) Being the victim of an automobile accident. |

*Item II*

Order the following conditions—states of being—in terms of the degree of sympathy or compassion which each evokes in you.

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| (A) A poor person. | (D) A victim of a delinquent or criminal act. |
| (B) A sick adult.  | (E) A civilian wounded in time of war.        |
| (B') A sick child. | (F) An adult criminal.                        |
| (C) A delinquent.  | (G) An automobile accident victim.            |

The remaining areas, of information and action, were examined with the following questions:

*Item III*

Order the following areas on the basis of your general knowledge of each.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (A) The general problem of poverty in America.             | (D) Crime control: general procedures taken by the police to protect persons, apprehend offenders, and prevent civil disorder. |
| (B) General medical developments in a non-technical sense. | (E) General proceedings concerning disarmament.  |
| (C) General developments in the treatment of delinquency.  | (F) General developments in the treatment of adult criminals.  |

*Item IV*

If forced to assign priority in the allocation of limited financial resources, I would arrange the following areas accordingly.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (A) Research in the area of poverty.          | (D) Research in the area of crime control.        |
| (B) Research in medicine.                     | (E) Research in the area of disarmament.          |
| (C) Research in the treatment of delinquency. | (F) Research in the treatment of adult criminals. |

In all four items the possible objection that this procedure would naturally discriminate against the criminal contexts was taken into account by having the same conditions evaluated without the

necessity of forced ranking. The results were essentially the same.<sup>3</sup>

These items were presented to a sample of 549 college students.<sup>4</sup> Two schools were involved: one an "Ivy League" college; the other a "State University". This grouping made possible the following comparisons: (1) an institutional break, from which social class differences could be inferred; (2) a sex break; (3) a course break, between those who had finished a course in criminology and those who had not; and (4) a class break, to gauge any change taking place in the course of a four year period.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 indicates the distribution for all subjects in each of the four sections. The level of correlation between sections, as well as the position of the delinquent and adult offender, suggests certain patterns that will hold true throughout the study. Three major points are involved. First, the general relationship, between what one knows about an area and how willing one is to allocate scarce resources to that area, was an imperfect one. However, in the particular relationship between knowledge of delinquency and adult criminality and readiness to channel limited funds toward greater research in these areas there was a close approxi-

<sup>3</sup> When forced ranking is used, the argument might be made that a rank order is established which is a statistical artifact. For example, one may feel roughly the same sympathy for several areas and not be able to express it under these conditions. To examine this point, a further inquiry was conducted in which the method of forced choice in rank assignment was replaced by the selection of a numerical position along a scale for each condition in each section. For example:

## Item I

Various conditions are described below. With reference to each, choose the answer that comes closest to your own feeling.

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| A  | (a) I can very easily imagine myself in this situation.                 |
| B  |   |
| B' | (b) I can easily imagine myself in this situation.                      |
| C  |   |
| D  | (c) I can with some difficulty imagine myself in this situation.        |
| E  |   |
| F  | (d) I find it very difficult to imagine myself in this situation.       |
| G  |   |
|    | (e) I find it virtually impossible to imagine myself in this situation. |

This procedure permitted ties and allowed the expression, for example, of equal sympathy for the delinquent and the indigent. The results were essentially the same as those obtained in the forced choice approach, and hence the assumption of a meaningful rank order is preserved.

<sup>4</sup> Students in various sociology classes made up the sample. They represent a reasonable cross section of the average, social science oriented undergraduate at each institution.

mation. (The one exception to this concerned a group which had finished a course in criminology!) Second, the correlation between the two dimensions of identification did not in this or most instances reach the level of significance. Nevertheless, because of the confounding caused by the consistent divergent ranking of one and only one condition ("B"), these levels do suggest the likelihood that further refinement will make a higher correlation possible. In the present case, and throughout the study, the uniform ranking of the delinquent and adult offender categories—in both dimensions—remains highly significant. Third, the relationship between identification and allocation was not a uniform one. At the ranking extremes the tendency was toward concomitance, i.e., items ranked first and last in one section tended to be ranked the same way in the other, while in the middle ranks the relationship was less clear. In the case of the criminality categories, the delinquent rank in the allocation and identification sections was always higher than the rank of the adult offender, which was usually last.

Over-all, these findings confirm the original contention, that the ability to identify with either the delinquent or the adult offender would be slight. It was, ranks 7 and 8 respectively. The adult criminal did no better in the allocation of funds, ranked last, whereas there was greater willingness to support delinquency research. Finally, as suggested above, there was a close

correspondence in the criminality areas between information and allocation, with more being known—and more being done—about the treatment of delinquents than about the treatment of adult offenders.

#### *Criminology and Non-Criminology Students*

This comparison examines the impact of a formal criminology course and a liberal criminological ideology upon the information students possess, the action they are willing to take, and the capacity they have for sympathy with criminal and delinquent states. These findings, contrasted with those obtained from students who lacked such exposure, provide a concrete bench mark against which to judge the impact of selected course work upon deeply held values.

Looking first at the criminology students, one observes a modification—vis-à-vis the total group—of information ranks, with delinquent, criminal and crime control categories all being upgraded. Of greater significance was the fact that this information did not influence the pattern of allocation; that is, greater knowledge of delinquency and adult criminality did not result in a greater willingness to allocate funds in these directions, nor did it result in a greater capacity to identify with either human condition. If, then, the problem is actually one of identification, it cannot be solved by the simple expansion of course offerings. On the contrary, it is apparent that the capacity for

TABLE 1  
RANK ORDER AND MEAN RANK OF ALL SUBJECTS IN EACH SECTION

Rank Position	Sections (N = 549)								
	Empathy with Sec. I		Sympathy for Sec II		Rank Position	Knowledge of Sec. III		Research into Sec. IV	
	R	M	R	M		R	M	R	M
1	B	1.40	B'	2.75	1	A	2.61	B	2.17
2	G	2.95	G	3.28	2	D	3.00	A	2.70
3	B'	3.25	E	3.89	3	B	3.35	C	3.27
4	D	4.33	A	4.38	4	C	3.35	E	3.78
5	A	5.40	D	4.44	5	F	4.19	D	4.16
6	E	5.63	B	4.69	6	E	4.44	F	4.91
7	C	5.99	C	5.34					
8	F	7.05	F	7.15					
Rank order correlation	$R = .53; p > .05$					$R = .39; p > .05$			

(In each section of this table the coefficient of concordance was significant at the .01 level.)

identification with various conditions is the result of a total life experience and cannot be easily changed by the addition of new information.

When the criminology group was compared with the non-criminology group, the only major difference was at the information level,  $R = .38$ ;  $p > .05$ . In the remaining areas the rankings of the two groups were significantly correlated. In particular, attention should be called to the ranking of the delinquent (seventh) and the criminal (eighth) in both dimensions of identification.

#### *Male and Female*

Beginning with the men, we found that the relationship between what they knew about a condition and how much they were willing to spend to improve it, was not very great,  $R = .48$ ;  $p > .05$ . Nevertheless, their specific knowledge of delinquency and adult criminality treatment programs corresponded closely to their willingness to allocate resources in these areas, ranks 4 and 6, and 3 and 6 respectively. Once again, the delinquent fared better than the adult offender.

Association between the two dimensions of identification was not significant,  $R = .46$ ;  $p > .05$ , yet there was agreement on the lowest rankings for the delinquent and adult criminal respectively. When this was related back to allocation, we found the lowest economic priority assigned to the needs of the adult offender, with a somewhat greater economic concern expressed for the delinquent, rank 3.

When these findings were compared with the female reaction, the result was one of complete agreement.<sup>5</sup> Rank correlations in all four items were significant. No less significant is the meaning of this consensus. With criminal behavior overwhelmingly male, it is interesting to note that the female group was as unable to identify with, and as unwilling to support research, in these areas as was the male group, the identification capacity, at least in the test areas, being apparently the result of a similar cultural conditioning for both males and females.

#### *"Ivy League" and "State University"*

Considering the "State University" first, we found the usual general gap between information

<sup>5</sup> Further comparisons were made between males and females on the basis of whether or not they had had a criminology course, and the level of agreement was essentially the same. Rank correlations were significant in all sections.

and allocation,  $R = .43$ ;  $p > .05$ , and the usual specific correspondence between knowledge and action in the areas of delinquency and adult criminality. We also found that full correspondence between the dimensions of identification was prevented by the divergent ranking of condition "B." Nonetheless, the ranks assigned to the delinquent and adult criminal on both levels were those we had come to expect, namely seventh and last, respectively.

The "Ivy League" record was slightly different. In particular, the delinquent was elevated to the sixth rank in both levels of identification. This brought identification, at least in these areas, into close correspondence with both information and allocation rankings.

When the two schools were compared, these minor differences did not prevent significant rank correlations on all four items. In view of this agreement, it is clear that whatever social class distinctions may have been present in this comparison,<sup>6</sup> they did not condition a differential reaction in the areas studied. This may have been the result of a social class distribution which was skewed toward the upper rather than the lower end of the scale, thus precluding those lowest socio-economic levels where there might have been a different reaction, i.e., perhaps a greater ability to identify with, or assign economic priority to, the areas of delinquency and adult criminality.

#### *Comparison by Class—Freshman; Sophomore; Junior; Senior*

Variation by class was not great. In all years, the correspondence between information and allocation was substantial. This was particularly true with regard to the delinquency and criminality categories.

Levels of identification within each class were highly but not significantly correlated. There was, however, complete agreement among classes as to the seventh rank and last rank assigned to the delinquent and adult criminal, respectively.

In all, little change in information, allocation or identification takes place as a student passes through four years of college, the education proc-

<sup>6</sup> It was not possible to specifically examine the social class positions of the respondents. Nevertheless, the overwhelming tendency of the private College to service the children of upper middle and upper class homes, contrasted with the tendency of the University to draw largely from the middle, lower middle and working classes, supports the presumption of a class distinction between the two institutions.

ess alone having no appreciable influence in modifying reaction in the areas tested.

#### CONCLUSION

As the findings indicate, students—male and female, with and without a course in criminology, from private and public institutions, and in all classes—were largely unable to identify with either the delinquent or the adult offender. This

inability to identify was constant whatever the students' criminological knowledge, and it was apparently this failure in identification which made them unwilling to support research relevant to the treatment of the offender. In view of this, it is suggested that both public action and attitude in this area are to some extent conditioned by the level of identification existing between the public and the offender.