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Sociologic Problem

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II. THE SOCIOLOGIC PROBLEM.

H. D. NEWKIRK.¹

In reading Goring's "The English Convict," one is at once impressed with the challenge which stands out prominently proclaiming the fact that in the study of the criminal and the causes which lead him to be such, the statistical method is absolutely the only reliable one and that this method is practically infallible. He is modest enough, however, to state that, should the reader not be convinced of the truth of his conclusions, the fault lies with the paucity of data and not with the method itself.

Certainly no one can deny the value of accurate and complete statistics as evidence in any problem. In this case the labor involved has been immense and the data has been collected from a fairly large number of cases, yet, as Dr. Goring himself frequently admits, the facts themselves are often incomplete and are filled in from the law of general averages. Again, in gathering statistics, one may leave out data which, seemingly unimportant, may in reality be the deciding factor in any given question; or he may so arrange his data that it is entirely possible to finally deduce conclusions which in reality are not warranted. Also, it is true that certain subjects are more suitable for statistical treatment than others. Tangible, definite things are certainly more suitable for statistical treatment than intangible and indefinite subjects. Thus, it should follow that, if certain subjects are more suitable than others for definite, mathematical measurement, there should be some other method or methods of attacking the remainder; some method equally valuable, or more so, because of its special fitness for use in the particular branch in question. Dr. Goring, however, waves aside any other method and holds the statistical to be equally efficacious in measuring human character and the visible prominences of the human form. We believe that it will take more evidence than Dr. Goring has or can gather to convince the public at large that in studying the criminal and, especially, the causes of his criminality only one method should be used, and all others held of no avail. The descriptive method has been of great service in the past and we believe will always continue to be in the future. This is especially true when considering the sociologic aspect of the present work, which phase only we are discussing at this time.

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With chapter five, Dr. Goring begins more especially the sociologic phase of his subject and makes detailed investigation of the divisions of environment and heredity. By following his statistical method, he concludes that (page 288) "Crime in this country is only to a trifling extent (if any) the product of social inequality, of adverse environment, or of other manifestations of what may be comprehensively termed the 'force of circumstances.' "

This seems to us an exceedingly broad statement and one which should not be made without a full and complete knowledge of facts, for it is contrary to the accepted belief of many competent students; yet (p. 266) he states: "The environmental conditions possibly related to crime are so manifold and complicated, and may come into association in so great a variety of ways and degrees, that to disentangle satisfactorily the contributory effectiveness of each form and its relation to all others would lead to a long and complicated inquiry. Such a complete and final investigation of the matter is not possible within the limitations of the present records, whose analysis will hardly enable us to make more than a superficial survey of the subject."

In discussing this topic he subdivides environmental conditions arbitrarily and solely into (1) nationality, (2) education, (3) employment, (4) alcoholism, (5) influence of family life, (6) relation of the first conviction to a subsequent conviction of convicts, with several minor subdivisions, and by a process of cold figures, gathered in an uncertain way (partly from mentally deficient convicts), proceeds boldly to the above conclusions.

We are surprised to note the apparent lack of thoroughness Dr. Goring uses in his treatment of environment as a cause of criminality. His subdivisions of the subject are very limited and his data is not of large amount; also we consider that some of the most important factors which are usually considered prominent as causes, he has passed over entirely. In the matter of "Correlation of age of subject at death of mother with criminality (p. 281 and table 272), he bases all his conclusions on a series of only 278 cases. Such phases as divorce, drugs, gambling, bad literature, bad company and all the numerous possible contingencies which are understood by us all, as we may have come into close relationship with them as positive factors in the development of anti-social tendencies, have not been included at all in the discussion. Dr. Goring evidently loses sight of the fact that it is perfectly possible for some one element, which, in itself perfectly normal, yet when combined with others may, even in a normal-minded person, so exasperate and excite

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his mind that criminal acts may result. Just as in Chemistry one may have a combination of elements, perfectly harmless in themselves, yet when a single atom is added to it we may have a very destructive combination.

His conclusion (p. 287) that "adverse environment is related much more intimately to the intelligence of convicts than it is to the degree of their recidivism" seems hardly warranted, then, in view of the fact that his sources of data are so limited and the range of his investigation has been narrowed to such small proportions.

While we do not desire to discredit the statistical method, it would seem to us that there certainly should be a more rational and, indeed, a more exact method of studying this problem of environment. We believe that this phase of the subject is so intricate, it is bound up with so many unmeasurable elements that individual, analytical study will in the end yield far more satisfactory results.

Before discussing this subject further, let us note his conclusions in regard to heredity as a cause of criminality (p. 348): "They (the children) have inherited a certain grade of criminal diathesis; and although not today so designated, they will ultimately pass into the ranks of recognized criminals." Again (p. 353): "We see from these correlation coefficients that in their conviction and imprisonment for crime, sons tend to resemble their parents." Also (p. 372), in his final conclusion, speaking of feeble-mindedness, alcoholism, epilepsy, sexual profligacy, ungovernable temper, obstinacy of purpose and willful anti-social activity, Dr. Goring notes with emphasis, "every one of these, as well as feeble-mindedness, being heritable qualities."

Thus, he would lead us to infer that criminal tendencies or traits are directly inherited as such. This is also a statement of vast importance.

The controversy as to whether heredity or environment has the greater influence is old, but it takes on new importance in the study of the criminal. We are of the impression that the preponderance of opinion at the present time is that there is no such thing as direct inheritance of traits; that is, no direct transmission of traits through the germ plasm; but if Dr. Goring is quite certain that there is such a thing as direct inheritance of criminal traits, he must concede an inheritance of other mental traits. If a son inherits his father's tendency to steal or forge notes or pick safes, surely we would have sons inheriting tendencies towards mechanics, book-keeping and stenography. There is surely a difference between inheritance and repetition of acts by children. A son may become

a burglar or steal if his father did the same things, and indeed it is probable that he will do so; but this is far from saying that he inherited any part of his liking for these acts. We would rather say he had simply been stimulated by his natural environment to follow the path of least resistance. Also a son may become a mechanic or bookkeeper, following directly in the footsteps of his father, but this does not mean at all that there is any inheritance involved.

We believe that instead of direct inheritance of criminality or any other trait, the only thing that is passed on in this line is brain capacity. In other words, the father transmits to his son a latent force of brain energy, more or less complete, according as it has been vitiated by various factors, such as alcohol, venereal disease and other sources of dissipation, or improved by careful living and healthy mating. The brain energy may be used in whatever way the individual sees fit, but usually he follows the path of least resistance. So if a son is brought up in an atmosphere of theft and is trained to that moral level, sooner or later in his unequal struggle for existence, due to his lack of a positive moral education and failure to learn proper, honest methods of obtaining property, he will be likely to use his brain along the path of least resistance and follow the occupation of a criminal. But if you transplant at birth this same son and put him in a good home, where his body can have proper nourishment, so that he will not be forced to fight an unequal physical battle, and where he can have the benefit of a good moral training and the advantage of associating with healthy-minded, normal boys and men, will he then throw all this aside and choose a criminal career? Even though he should do this it would not be proof that he had directly inherited a special "criminal diathesis." It would be entirely possible that he had simply failed to inherit enough brain force to enable him to distinguish clearly between right and wrong, so that when he is under stress of circumstances he makes the wrong step. He might also continue in this wrong way for the same reason. Whatever element of heredity there is then may be along the line of quantity of brain capacity, rather than any special form of trait, be it criminal, mechanical or clerical.

This would seem a natural conclusion and has been tested in different ways. Children of normal mentality, living in localities where the parents have been farmers for generations, suddenly becoming orphans, have at an early age been transplanted to an entirely different environment, grown up and become professional men or mechanics. Likewise children of criminals, also being transplanted at an early age, provided their mentality is normal, have

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very frequently made good average citizens. If, however, they are mentally deficient, the chance that they will successfully resist the temptations which sooner or later come to all are much smaller.

The rational idea of the effect of environment and heredity on the making of the criminal is to us, then, not that there is a direct inheritance of criminal traits, but a direct inheritance of deficient brain capacity, and this, as a factor in crime, is effected to a very large extent by the "forces of circumstance."

In closing, we wish to state that we agree thoroughly with Dr. Goring that defective mentality is a prominent cause of criminality, but we would prefer to see it given a more prominent place than he assigns to it. We do not think a criminal diathesis, if there be such a thing, is inherited, but rather is it a question of transmission of general brain power; and we do believe that environment, with all its subtle influences, plays a powerful role in moulding this inherited brain capacity.

Our own study, particularly with juveniles, has been the main factor in bringing us to this conclusion.