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THE DETECTION OF THE "PRE DELINQUENT" JUVENILE

Comments on the Methodology of Research

A contribution from the World Health Organization to the United Nations
Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders

Introduction

It is natural that the World Health Organization, which has always stressed the preventive aspects of health work, should adopt a similar attitude towards the psychiatric aspects of juvenile delinquency.

Effective prevention must be based on a tested theory of etiology and it is the acquisition of such etiological knowledge that is of particular importance if the prevention of juvenile delinquency is to become more effective. Etiological knowledge of this type can only be acquired by planned research and psychiatric research in this field presents many methodological difficulties.

It therefore seems appropriate, on the occasion of the United Nations Congress on Delinquency that the contribution of the World Health Organization should concentrate on the methodological problems of psychiatric research of one problem of great importance for the prevention of crime, namely the detection of the "pre-delinquent juvenile".

When delinquency is defined according to the behaviour of apprehended offenders, any population of delinquents will prove to be heterogeneous not only with respect to offences committed, but also with respect to personalities. It would therefore appear that to essay the detection of pre-delinquent children would present an impossibly complex, not to say ridiculous, task. Nevertheless, in so far as delinquents can be classified according to their different developmental histories, it may prove possible to delineate certain pointers to future delinquency in some of the classes so found, particularly when environmental factors are taken also into consideration. The purpose of such "detection" of "pre-delinquents" is to

make endeavours at earlier treatment and control, on the assumption that earlier treatment will be more effective and that growth in the wrong direction may be prevented thereby. It is important to realize at the present stage of our knowledge that this is an assumption, the proof of which is yet to be adduced. Certain evidence indicated below, tends to bear out the general hypothesis, but we are as yet not able to indicate clearly in which areas such effort is likely to be maximally effective nor in which types of personality, except in certain special categories.

The matter is further complicated by known facts concerning undetected delinquency. Court statistics only reflect a small portion of offending children - for example: one extensive study in Boston,¹ of children who have never been reported, has shown an incidence of undetected violations of laws equal to more than half the number of violations found in a comparable group of apprehended delinquents. Another extensive and apparently reliable study of older youths in Texas,² shows that the "delinquencies" of non-apprehended college students were apparently as serious, although not as frequent, as those of youths in the court. What is the difference, then, between an official, legal delinquent and any other child? Are the legal delinquents more delinquent? Do they commit offences which carry with them some tendency to detection - unconsciously motivated, perhaps - or are they just unlucky? Until the extent of this problem can be gauged there seems little hope that states or symptoms of pre-delinquency can be accurately delineated through a study of apprehended delinquents. When pre-delinquent criteria are adduced from a study of known delinquents only, then their application will result in the labelling of "pre-delinquent" of many children who will never appear before courts. Whether or not it is desirable to cast the net so widely will depend on the answers to other questions as yet unanswered - the fate, in terms of mental health, of children showing these apparently untoward symptoms, the extent to which treatment, if applied, is efficacious, and what methods might be used.* The discussion and solution of these problems may be partly facilitated by the adoption of a psychological criterion of delinquency in any group to be studied, but such a re-definition of delinquency will present other practical and theoretical difficulties in its turn.

* The experiences of the Cambridge ~~Sensville~~ Youth Study show the complexity of the problems.³

The Psychiatric Definition of a Delinquent

The definition of a disease category in psychiatry is beset by many difficulties. All of the so-called behavioural disorders have a multiple etiology; casual factors arising from undefined constitutional differences and from environmental influences - both physical and social - combine to produce attitudes and character traits which become possessed of a relative stability. These in turn become modified by the response of the personality to the perceived environment, producing the overt behaviour and phantasy life of each individual. Because of this casual complexity it is not possible to define disorders according to isolated etiological elements nor is it easy to delineate symptom patterns which can be used as labelled categories with any degree of precision.

However, an attempt may be made to classify by symptomatology. Such classification is not markedly useful so long as we consider the manifest, superficial, behaviours of our subjects, but becomes increasingly valuable as we obtain a deeper insight into the attitudes and feelings which are the antecedents of behavioural action, so that classification is made by an ordering of these antecedents.

In the case of delinquent behaviour, one may assume that behind acts of stealing, violence and rebelliousness lies an attitude of opposition to persons or society. Psychologically viewed, an act of infringement of the law is not delinquent unless it is purposeful; an accidental infringement of a code or regulation may not carry any psychological implication of an attitude of intended infringement. Conversely, an intentional aggressive or antisocial act may not be legally culpable, although the intent and motivation is similar to that of another who offends in the legal sense. A psychological definition of a delinquent act lies in the consideration of the motivations of that act. All acts which are consciously or unconsciously directed against the legal code are psychologically delinquent whether detected and punished or not, but these do not comprise all those which the psychologist regards as delinquent: there are many acts directed against persons or society which are not punishable by law.

We may subsume all acts motivated against persons as aggressive acts, and these include the behaviours of "delinquents". Our task then becomes to classify those engaging in such acts, and this may be done not through a consideration of their physical nature but by their patterns of occurrence in each individual, taking into account the environmental circumstances surrounding them and the age of the child.

Behaviour patterns may be further classified according to their repetitiveness in any one individual - repetitiveness being the characteristic of a large class of mentally ill persons - and by their deeper motivational elements. Thus one can distinguish repetitive patterns directed only against particular classes of individuals - the characteristic of the neurotic delinquent - or those which are more diffuse and wayward, stemming from an unconscious need for aggressive actions in general - characteristic of the "delinquent character". The diffuseness of the objects against which the behaviour is directed betrays the deep nature of the origin of the delinquent character defect, and leads to the hypothesis that the true delinquent character is largely formed as a consequence of developmental disturbance arising earlier than the neurotic fixations; and probably even earlier than paranoid or depressive positions are formed. Psychoanalysis of certain delinquents lends support to this theory, as do characterological and developmental studies.^{4,5}

Of those persons who manifest repetitive acts against persons or society, some are technically neurotic - their offensive acts being directed against specific persons involved in their neurotic complex; some have disorders which are more closely related to the schizophrenias, in which the offensive acts are merely incidental; others have a more diffuse extraverted aggression which shows itself in acts directed against persons of many types, property ideals, institutions, or even society in general. These latter are the true psychological delinquents, a large and still heterogenous group. In practice there are found many intermediate or transitional types between any or all of these three classes, together with transitional types between each of the three and the "accidental" delinquent.

Furthermore, a subnormal degree of intelligence in a person may lead to a relative lack of social control and consequently to offensive acts. In such

persons the delinquency is merely a complication of their central disorder, intellectual insufficiency. In countries where services for the care and education of the mentally subnormal are not well developed, these persons will more easily come into conflict with the law; consequently, a survey of legal delinquents in such a country will show a large proportion of the dull and defective. Conversely, when services for the subnormal are well developed, the intelligence of a representative sample of legal delinquents will show a mean value equal to that of the non-delinquent population. One of the general measures for the social control of delinquency lies in providing for diagnosis, treatment and education of children of subnormal intelligence.

Occasional antisocial or illegal behaviour may also be manifest in those with other psychiatric disturbances - particularly seen in children suffering from the varieties of psychoneuroses and psychoses. In such cases the early detection and prevention of the occasional antisocial conduct displayed can be sought through an understanding of the now well-known psychodynamics of these syndromes, through methods of case-finding available to child guidance clinics and school psychological services, and through methods of psychiatric treatment which are aimed at the total personality disorder, the disappearance of delinquent conduct being an incidental result of the therapeutic action.

In theory, such therapy is relatively simple, but in practice the delineation of these special groups from any population of children with conduct disorders is not easy without extensive diagnostic services - in any case a large residue of true delinquent syndromes will remain whose psychopathology is less well understood and whose treatment is less effective.

Methods of Research into the genesis of Delinquency

(a) The longitudinal method

The essence of the longitudinal method in developmental research consists of repeated observation and examination of the same individuals. The selection of the individuals to be examined will, of course, be crucial in the extrapolation of the results to a wider population. This point has proved to be the bugbear of all researches of this type. In its extreme form, one may allude to the developmental

researches of child psychoanalysts. It is true that the knowledge of development in their subjects is not entirely obtained through observation. Indeed, in the normal psychoanalytic investigation the knowledge is largely derived from history-taking and consequently recall either by the subjects or by those in their intimate circles, but in so far as this recall is an accurate picture of the past - and the researcher is entitled to have some good judgement on this point - the method is basically longitudinal. The difficulty lies in the generalization of the findings. When the subjects are selected by reason of their referral for untoward symptoms, one cannot, with any assessable degree of certainty, apply the findings to children who have not been so referred; neither can one generalize from studies of neurotic children to construct developmental pictures of, for instance, delinquents. The strength of the method, however, rests on the assumption that one can generalize within behavioural classes; that is, that findings from the examination of a sample of delinquent children can be extrapolated to provide working hypotheses for the understanding of other children with like behavioural manifestations. In so far as the classification chosen for theorizing is valid and definable, the findings - provided they are themselves accurately and reliably observed or deduced - will be important.

Whether the findings and developmental reconstructions are valid or not must be judged from the total context of experience in such methods and from the consistency of the general developmental theoretical structure in which the researcher operates. It is true that there are serious doctrinal differences between theories in this field, but these differences should be regarded as temporary and a reflection of the relative newness of the science.

In comparing such a retrospective longitudinal method - accepting the weaknesses of its data - with a directly observational longitudinal method, it should be noted that the strength of the former method lies in the easy and relevant selection of the population to be examined. A directly observational longitudinal method must aim at a random selection of subjects; of these, some will prove to be delinquent, and data will have to be collected which is relative to their development which can be compared and contrasted with the non-delinquents in the observed sample. There are two practical weaknesses in this method: first, the relative rarity of delinquents appearing in the observed population and, secondly, the influence of the study itself

on the development of the child. This latter influence will be, even in the best or least disturbing conditions, unassessable. At worst - from the point of view of a developmental study of "abnormal" children - it may invalidate the findings completely by providing a therapeutically oriented influence. This might occur in studies where the families subjected to observation are recruited often before a child is born, and are self-selected according to their willingness to co-operate in the research.

A third technical difficulty in long-term developmental studies, which is not necessarily so serious, lies in the choice of factors to be observed and recorded. One may attempt to observe everything that might be relevant to a number of research problems - thus gaining time by dealing with a large number of possible developmental hypotheses or theories - or one may seek specific observations directed by a specifically deductive set of hypotheses previously set up. The method is the most efficient when dealing with problems of causal relationships where the cause and effect process is brief in time, but it becomes increasingly cumbersome when long periods are involved and when the observations and hypotheses are complex. However, this can be to some extent overcome by using spaced examinations - usual in studies of cultural anthropology - but it is then more difficult to retain the original sample of specified individuals which is so necessary for deep clinical study. As far as is known, there are no such studies in progress directed particularly towards the delinquency problems of European-type cultures, but some direction for future work may be gained from anthropological methodologies.

When one is able to deal with certain specific and measurable characteristics in children, the longitudinal method has clear advantages. An example may be taken from recent studies in electroencephalography. In the examination of criminals and psychopathic patients, it has been noted that a large proportion of them manifest certain characteristic wave-formations in the electroencephalogram. These specific findings occur within psychopathic samples with a higher incidence than is found in normals. The hypothesis may then be set up that this specific wave characteristic is in some way related to delinquent conduct and a random sample of children can be examined. By this method, the distribution of the characteristic within a population can be adduced and the progress of the characteristic can be followed through different age samples and through the same sample of children at different ages.

The findings in this case confirm the association between the electroencephalography characteristic and delinquent behaviour, and lead to the delineation of a number of children who may be regarded as being potential delinquents. This method is relatively pure and quantitative from a methodological point of view because the characteristic in question is one that can be demonstrated by repeated examination, but it should be observed that such purity is not often found with respect to the psychological and cultural characteristics which may be hypothesized in the causation of delinquent conduct.

It should be noted that many other longitudinal studies exist which commence with a sample of delinquents and follow them over a period of years.⁶ Such studies tend to define more clearly the patterns of delinquent behaviour and their occurrence in society rather than to reveal early etiological factors, and are essentially epidemiological in their aims.

(b) Comparative methods

The well-known researches of the Gluecks⁷ reported in "Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency" were based on a comparative study of 500 delinquents and 500 matched controls. The study sought to measure the differences between the two samples in respect to a large number of measurements and assessments which were judged, a priori, to be important. From a study of these differences prediction tables were compiled which, if applied to individuals, indicate a certain probability that delinquency may occur. These tables are conceived as guides which might be of use in determining whether a child should be further examined by individual psychological-psychiatric techniques. Should these tables prove to be successful, then something has been discovered which directly relates to the problem of the detection of the pre-delinquent.

The age of the child at which such predictive factors may be applied is essentially the age covered by the pilot investigation, and may be too close to the age at which manifest "legal" delinquency is seen. For instance, the histories taken during this research led the authors to state that the earliest delinquent manifestations occurred most frequently at six to nine years. Their examinations were accurate and easily quantifiable about occurrences around the age of examination, 12 years; only the data of "social background" used for the prediction

tables stretched back into the presumptively pre-delinquent period. To have adduced more data than was actually taken, covering the infancy, pre-school, and early school periods, would have led to problems outside the scope of the study.

More systematic study of the early lives of delinquent children was shown in Lewis'⁸ study of a sample of institutionalized children in England. This study, and the previous study of Carr-Saunders et al.⁹ were not pure examples of the comparative method, as matched controls were not used. However, as their samples were heterogeneous, some "control" could be made through a comparison of different sub-groups in the samples. For example, Lewis, in evaluating mother-child separation as an etiological factor, found a proportion of her sample to have had serious separation factors, as shown by their histories, and that this group evidenced more serious symptoms. However, separation factors are not inevitably followed by delinquent behaviour. The position is indeed that a large variety of abnormal behaviours may in some way result from disturbances of mother-child relationships of which delinquent behaviour is only one manifestation. The tracing of personality development as influenced by such early separations will be alluded to later.

(c) Experimental methods

A typical experimental method is exemplified by setting up a specific social therapeutic action in a certain area, both the methods of therapy and the detection of children and families to be submitted to such treatment being based on theoretical considerations. The results of the social therapeutic action can thus be followed by the change in the rates of detected delinquents in the therapeutic area. An example of this kind of social experiment is seen in New South Wales, where all truancy cases are reported immediately to a child welfare officer, who takes whatever therapeutic action is within his means through the social work methods, clinical referrals, etc. In the areas in which child welfare officers have been working, on the hypothesis that truancy is a common first symptom in delinquents, the delinquency incidence has fallen sharply over a period of several years. In so far as the case finding technique is based on a clear hypothesis, the results of the experiment lend support to it and offer some hope that pre-delinquent conduct may thereby be detected and treated. There is no doubt that this method, if conceived as an experiment, can lead to findings which throw light on the whole problem. It should be noted, however, that it is again

difficult to extrapolate such findings. It may be justifiable on the basis of the New South Wales experiments to conclude that truancy is a common pre-delinquent symptom in that area, but no data are provided as to whether truancy is a common pre-delinquent symptom in any other area. Indeed, our knowledge of cultural differences would lead us to suspect that this is not so in some other countries.

The Cambridge-Somerville Study³ provides an example of a social experiment based on control groups. Basically this study was a ten-year research project involving the application of social work techniques to two groups of boys, one thought to consist of pre-delinquents and the other not. Unfortunately, owing to difficulties of sampling, difficulties of follow-up and perhaps lack of intensity in the social work help available, little difference was found between the two groups. If one had examined only the "pre-delinquent" group, one might have come to the conclusion that the treatment programme was to some extent effective in that many of the children in this group did not become delinquent. However, when one compared the actual findings with those of the control group, it was seen that this optimistic outlook could not be sustained. The value of a control group in this kind of social experimental research was therefore sharply demonstrated. One should note, however, that in the case of the work in New South Wales, automatic control groups are provided by areas in which no social therapeutic action is taken and the conclusion that delinquency was prevented by action taken as a result of truancy detection is made not only from the fall in delinquency rate in the therapeutic areas but from the persistence of the delinquency rates in the areas not so treated.

(d) Clinical psychiatric methods

The history of the development of psychiatric knowledge shows two trends; first, the development of a useful classification of mentally abnormal persons and, second, a deeper understanding of the motivations of their conduct. For example, in the history of our knowledge relating to schizophrenia, we see the importance of the taxonomy of Kraepelin, who distinguished between the group of schizophrenic syndromes, the group of manic depressive syndromes and the organic cerebral disorders. This was followed by more precise descriptions of various types of schizophrenia and their natural developmental histories in individuals by Bleuler, followed by more intensive work through psychoanalytic methods, which led not only to a deeper understanding of

the mechanisms, but also to a more succinct classification of different types of mechanisms. The therapeutic endeavours of Rosen, based on psychoanalytic theory, again lead to a better understanding of classification in relation to therapeutic possibilities. Similarly, the basic classification of neurotic states provided by Freud - particularly the differentiation of the transference neuroses - has led to more intensive work on the psychopathology of hysterical states. The separation and ordering of hysterical mechanisms has led to a deeper understanding of the therapeutic possibilities and to a classification of mechanisms; this classification can again be used in therapy and can provide further etiological hypotheses. The demonstration of the therapeutic potentialities which arose from this deeper understanding has been seen in the treatment of hysterical persons in the armed forces during the recent war.

The methodology can be seen in three stages, first an examination of the grossly abnormal with the construction of taxonomic and etiological hypotheses, secondly the observation of the developmental processes hypothesized in the infant and their subsequent refinement and, thirdly, the discovery of these processes in their minor forms in the total personalities of adults, both normal and abnormal. This latter phase leads to a new concept of abnormality; many of the mechanisms are seen to be part of the natural development of all individuals and the abnormality of the ill person consists not so much in his having those characteristics but in their intensity, fixity and duration within his total behaviour.

A closer examination of psychiatric research in delinquency shows tremendous weaknesses. The total amount of psycho-analytic work in this field is quantitatively far less than in the other psychiatric areas. Certainly Aichhorn has been fruitful in hypotheses; Bowlby's study of affectionless juvenile thieves⁴ has led on to the various hypotheses utilized in the separation studies; Peto's analysis⁵ of two "reformed" professional criminals - one neurotic and the other psychotic as a result of their reformation - has led him to hypotheses about the developmental stages involved in the criminogenic mechanisms.

At the second stage - dependent on hypotheses from the first - we find very few studies specifically designed to test hypotheses and to elaborate theories. Amongst those deliberately planned in a relatively pure theoretical design we find the

separation researches.^{10,11,12} The difficulties of research into the field of delinquency etiology are greater than in other psychopathological states because the characteristic "delinquent" mechanisms commence earlier in the child's development.

As the first stage is relatively weak and the second stage correspondingly incomplete, the next stage - fitting the data to the personalities of the varieties of so-called normal persons, is almost non-existent; it is only after this stage that a clear concept of delinquency - defined psychologically - can be set up.

Additional to the problem of genetic and developmental etiology is the question of breakdown. Similar personalities when exposed to different contemporaneous influences may respond differently, so that one may exhibit symptoms while another may remain socially adapted or even dynamically stable. A good deal is known about the mechanisms of breakdown in common types of neuroses but relatively little is known of any of the disorders showing extraverted symptoms - paranoia, paranoid schizophrenia and delinquency being the outstanding syndromes of this class. Assuming that in any population there are a number of potential neurotics, psychotics and delinquents, the social psychologist, in his search for the factors causing breakdown, has endeavoured to understand the social structure in terms of its meaning for the individuals within it. This work has, at first, elicited all the obvious evidences of social structure - economics, group formations, power-relationships, ideologies, identifications, role-taking, etc. and secondly has sought to discover which of these elements of social structure are relevant and important for the development of the individual. The examination of the social structure by observers does not necessarily describe the structure as perceived by the individuals and the discrepancy between the observer's structure and the subjective structure of the individuals under examination creates a technical difficulty for which there are, at present, only partial solutions. Lewin has shown one method of approaching this problem, by an analysis of the behavioural changes in groups which are to some degree caused by experimental changes. Many studies of social structure can be criticized on these grounds: that the elements of the social structure are selected and classified by the observer without precise relation to their meaning for the individual subjects composing the social group; or that the meaning for the individuals is assumed without the individual analysis - apperceptive or operational - necessary to relate the observational data to the personalities.

Various attempts have been made to overcome this difficulty by using interviewing data exclusively for the depiction of the social structure - thus constructing a culture based entirely on perceptions of the individuals within it and therefore one which is, in all its aspects, composed of elements which are meaningful. These studies remove one of the difficulties - the imposition of the research worker's "structure" on the society, although he cannot remain free from imposing his own sampling and classification on the extensive material. When analysed on a longitudinal basis such studies can show the development of role-taking in children¹³ and can lead to hypotheses for further motivational researches.

One basic difficulty in all this work is, however, the incompleteness of the data in respect to unconscious determinants, and the data are limited by the depth of the observational or interviewing techniques used. One partial remedy is to extend considerably the interviewing techniques and to use such additional tools as Rorschach testing.

The work to date shows up deficiencies in our knowledge of ordinary child development in its role-taking and reactive aspects. Many neurotics break down at adolescence, many mildly delinquent children become major delinquents at this phase, and our systematic knowledge of why and what produces the breakdown is negligible.

Conclusions

In summarizing the position concerning psychiatric research relevant to the detection of the "pre-delinquent" child, the main weaknesses noted are:

- (a) a paucity of published reports of complete psychoanalyses from which dynamic hypotheses may be made, and from which might be adduced differences between undetected and manifest delinquency;
- (b) a relative insufficiency, of observational studies with infants into behaviour which is, hypothetically, a primitive manifestation of mechanisms which underly delinquent conduct;
- (c) because of (a) and (b) an inability to understand the changes at the point of breakdown of a personality, and an inability to understand the mechanisms at the moment of the impulsive delinquent act;

- (d) a weakness of knowledge of normal personality development; in practice, particularly important at adolescence;
- (e) a relative lack of precise conceptualizations in the recent, but rapidly developing field of social psychology;
- (f) a lack of appreciation of the application of taxonomic methodology to the definition of problems thrown up by the use of "depth-psychological" data in place of superficial behavioural traits.

Apart from the expansion of empirical researches devised within detection and control programmes, one cannot expect much progress in researches involving more intense individual examinations until certain developments occur in the sociological and psychological sciences. There are evident indications that certain basic problems are receiving attention by workers in those fields which may be related to delinquency.

- (a) Modern anthropological studies on culture transmission are employing operational concepts and methods which can be transferred almost directly to the more complex cultures in which delinquency is a feature.
- (b) The psycho-analytic concepts of transference and counter-transference are crucial not only to the questions of elucidating the deficiencies in human relationships manifested by delinquent characters, but to the possibilities of effective treatment. These concepts are predominant in discussions in psychoanalytic circles.
- (c) Modern social psychology is becoming increasingly adept in the use of concepts of social structure and social role, so that researches in the areas of attitudes and relationships are becoming more precise and more fruitful.
- (d) The discovery of new techniques in analysis of variance¹⁴ and their application to clinical problems in schizophrenia by Beck and others¹⁵ has shown that taxonomic systems in psychopathology are possible; this kind of work can be repeated in the field of delinquency, so that basic problems in detection can be clarified, leading to precise experimental work on relatively small samples, which, in turn, can lead to the construction of empirical social researches directly concerned with prevention.

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