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PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

BY

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Mr. Starker is a psychologist in the Department of Social Welfare. He asks magistrates to follow up the suggestion of having the parents of delinquent children present in court, and to notify probation officers under whom delinquents are placed that they will be required to report. This enables the probation officer to work with, rather than against the delinquent.

Key factors in preventing delinquency are: father's discipline; mother's supervision; father's affection; mother's affection, and family cohesiveness. Shortcomings in any of these may produce personality disorders falling short of mental illness.

Character weaknesses can also be traced to parents, and the psychologist's treatment is usually direct and involves the co-operation of parents.

To stand before so many magistrates and speak is an awesome experience for me and I feel an immediate need to confess—I would like to confess that I believe the psychological aspects of juvenile delinquency to be overrated in many cases. The psychologist does not always have the answer and people tend to forget that the psychological treatment of the delinquent is only one weapon and not the entire arsenal. That the psychologist has a role to play in this field cannot be denied. I believe that it is necessary to use his diagnostic skill and the tools or tests of his profession in most cases, and that he contributes to the general understanding of personal relationships but I doubt if as much as 10 per cent of delinquents actually need intensive psychotherapy.

To diagnose emotional disturbances in delinquents with pinpoint accuracy remains a difficulty because the majority of these cases are borderline cases. You find a little bit of this and a little bit of that and in most cases it is difficult to assess to what extent the individual can or cannot be held responsible for his actions. Should he have lost complete contact with the world around him the diagnosis is easy, but in most cases he has a distorted view of the world around him and very often knowledge of his past experiences makes his distortions seem quite logical.

I would broadly classify the ordinary run of delinquents I see into two categories. In this classification I exclude the severely disturbed or mentally ill, as I have never found any such person appearing in court. In every case somebody along the line has spotted the illness and the individual has received the appropriate treatment.

The first category of delinquents are those with personality disorders which stem from unsatisfactory early experiences and which lead to the development of an inadequate person. This type of person is often a bit depressive, especially if things go wrong. He tends to stop caring and he couldn't care less if he gets into trouble. He is also emotionally withdrawn and has no emotional attachment to anybody. Very often this withdrawnness leads to promiscuity. He forms an association with one girl after another. As soon as he feels that he is getting emotionally involved with one girl he becomes anxious and moves on to another, and it is for this same reason that they drift from one job to another.

These individuals are able to tell you that they cannot feel and any form of excitement enables them to experience some emotion. The smoking of dagga or drinking to excess is often an attempt to get out of the emotional vacuum in which they are living. Unfortunately these spells of excitement are only temporary and after it is over they find themselves back in their own withdrawn little world. Even stealing a car and doing something dangerous with it, or sexual excitation, has no permanent after-effects which can give lasting satisfaction. The type of disorder discussed thus far can be diagnosed as a schizoid reaction.

In the category of borderline personality disorders the borderline paranoid could also be placed. This individual is always suspicious. He does not trust his parents, his teachers, the police, the courts or his social welfare officer. He feels everybody is against him and if he had persistent delusions with hallucinations he would be in a mental home, but he hasn't.

In this category one also finds the hypochondriac with many imaginary illnesses; the querulent who finds faults with everything and everybody and who can be most vociferous at an absconder's enquiry, as well as the anti-social or borderline psychopath. The borderline psychopath is probably the most difficult to deal with. It is a difficult case to diagnose and even after diagnosis there are many who believe that he cannot be treated and say "Put him in an institution and forget him". Doctors Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck found 7.3% of the delinquents "psychopathic" as opposed to .4% of the non-delinquents studied. Some of them do respond to treatment; others don't.

The first problem in diagnosis and treatment of these delinquents is therefore the fact that they are mostly borderline and the second is the fact that in most cases you find a mixture of the clinical entities described above. You get a little bit of this and little bit of that. You might feel that they are mentally ill and you cannot always say they shouldn't be punished. You cannot always say that society should be tolerant of their behaviour because it is difficult to make a pinpoint diagnosis and establish accurately to what extent the individual should or should not be held responsible.

One thread that runs through all these cases, however, is the fact that you are dealing with individuals who have had an unhappy early home environment. These problems are very much related to their relationships or lack of relationships with their parents at home. The magistrate described by Mr. Hervey¹ who insisted that parents be present at the court hearing and who gave fathers the opportunity to administer corporal punishment must have been some sort of a psychologist. It is a good idea to have the parents in court so that the whole family can be dealt with, and to me it sounded like a very good idea to have the parents administer corporal punishment; especially the father, because in the ideal home the father is authority. He is the person who should punish. The mother is the person who should supervise. At this point I would like to refer again to the work done by Doctors Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck. They examined the differences between a group of delinquent youth and a group of non-delinquent youth and they found five definite factors which distinguished the one from the other. They state that they can go into any school, do an assessment on children and with a 90% chance of success they can predict delinquency, and this they say can be done round about the age of 11. The five factors are: father's discipline; mother's supervision; father's affection; mother's affection; and family cohesiveness.

Up to now we have been dealing with delinquents where the problem is caused by faulty relationships in the home with resultant stunted personality development.

The second category of delinquents is those with a character weakness. This type I refer to as individual delinquents as opposed to social delinquents, and it is a category virtually unknown in this country. The individual delinquent has a faulty conscience. In most cases he has a good relationship with his parents and could be quite an adequate individual. Sometimes he has no conscience but most times there is a well-developed conscience, but it has gaps in it. He might for instance

1. In an address that covered much the same ground as that covered by Mr. O'Donnell (*ante*, p. 143) and which has therefore not been printed.

never steal but he will lie, or he will never swear but he will steal. As far as the inbuilt controls of behaviour are concerned they can be very strict in one sense, but completely lax in another. You may find a person completely lax in one aspect of his behaviour yet with a conscience that demands punishment for something which made him feel guilty a long time ago and he will commit a crime because he gets satisfaction from punishment.

With the individual delinquent there often is no evidence of early rejection by his parents. He is really liked by them. Sometimes he has not accepted their values or patterned his life on theirs and he has grown up as a loose entity in the family but it may also be that he is acting out in an anti-social way because this behaviour has been unconsciously fostered by his parents. In other words, very often it is the parents who have strong anti-social needs and when the children do something wrong they, the parents, get a certain satisfaction. They say: "I am right. From the day he was born he was no good. Look at what he is doing". They are not correcting this child, they are not stopping him because they are getting some gratification out of his behaviour. They are evasive and do not give the child clear direction. You have to spend a long time on a case before this angle is revealed. These parents will for instance say: "Here is some money for you, but don't tell your father about it. He must not know this". They therefore teach a child to be dishonest. When he is over the age they suggest that he tries to get into the movies at half price. They will say: "You must not play with fires, but let us make a fire in the sink over there". They do not clearly state that "Fires are dangerous". The child might steal some money from Auntie. They will say: "Why did you steal from Auntie? Why didn't you take my money instead?" The child is not getting a system of values to which he can adhere and which can help him to control his anti-social impulses. Parents often brag about shortchanging the shop-keeper while children sit around and listen to it. These parents are not putting over the correct values and these children in their relationship with their parents are having many faulty values integrated into their personality structures whilst the parents eventually get some satisfaction from the delinquent behaviour of their children. Often when a child does something wrong the parents panic. They become paralytic. They will not, if a child has taken something from a shop, go along and return it or pay for it. They panic. The children feel they are not able to control their own anti-social impulses, they feel that it is something that cannot be controlled and before long it is in fact something that cannot be controlled.

Other parents again will rationalize. The child will do something wrong and they will say "He will grow out of it, don't worry", and in

this way problems are not dealt with in the early stages. These are some of the basic factors which can be found in the individual delinquent which causes a faulty conscience to develop. To do anything by way of treatment in these cases, I wouldn't call it psychological treatment as such, you have to deal with the parents as well. You will never have success with the delinquent unless the parents can see in what way they themselves have brought on his condition.

Dealing with the juvenile you have got to establish a relationship. It is not always necessary to carry out involved psychotherapy. You deal with the problem directly. In the relationship, we try and teach him the missing values and so fill the gaps in his conscience, and as I have said, the parents in these cases also need to gain insight and co-operate.

We, as people dealing with delinquency, have to establish a relationship to achieve anything with the individual and the courts can help by sometimes taking the heat off us a bit. We can get control of a situation when a person is placed under supervision, but I notice that under supervision the courts may call for reports from the probation officer from time to time and I think that this is something that could help me personally. If when working with these juveniles we could tell him: "Look, this magistrate in six months time will want to know from the two of us what have we achieved, so we had better get cracking on this", we don't become the prison officers. We don't become the figures of authority—the people who are telling him: "Do this, do that", but instead become counsellors; the people who are helping him. We as well as the juvenile have to satisfy the magistrate that use has been made of the opportunity afforded us. Where punishment was postponed or suspended, the individual was given a chance, but he has to give some reckoning. This is one way in which the courts can help us and as I have already said the other way is by bringing the parents to court and thus forcing them to share in the problem, accepting responsibility for their part in the causation of the delinquency and helping us to sort it out.

DISCUSSION

Unfortunately the discussion which followed this address was not recorded.



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