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Family Therapy: Its Role in the Prevention of Criminality

ABSTRACT: The family imprints its members with selfhood in all cultures. Absence of family imprints can result in the development of deviant childhood behavior and loss of identity. In two black racial groups in dissimilar world areas and sampling (Kenya, Africa and Newark, N.J.), five familial determinants interfered with the development of culturally accepted family imprints and led to deviant and criminal behavior. It is suggested that if these deterrents, namely poverty, lack of family authority figures, rejection of the individual child, absence of family cohesiveness, and loss of individual identity within the family, were altered in their development by family therapy techniques, then criminal and deviant behavior would be decreased.

KEY WORDS: psychiatry, family relations, human behavior

The prevention of criminality is one of the foremost problems facing criminal justice and law enforcement agencies today. Efforts in rehabilitating criminal offenders and convicted prisoners have not been as successful as anticipated. The dam to stem the rising tide of criminality may lie in strengthening and unifying the family. The acceptance and care a child receives during infancy and childhood are always influenced by interparental adjustments as well as by the individual needs, hopes, fears, and expectations of each individual parent. All of these aspects of parental behavior contribute dynamically to the development of the child's social behavior pattern. Parental defects, including the rejection of the roles of parenthood, produce unwanted and rejected children. It has been recorded and it is well known that rejected children demonstrate a high susceptibility to behavior disorders and delinquency.

During a nine-year period approximately 4500 to 5000 criminals and criminal offenders were psychiatrically evaluated while incarcerated. Specific family defects were determined in most of these cases and led to the conclusion that their presence was contributing to the causes of criminality. These deficiencies were (1) poverty, (2) a lack of family authority figures (mother or father), (3) rejection of the individual child, (4) absence of family cohesiveness and diminished respect for the household unit, and (5) loss of individual identity within the family structure. Correcting these faults is no easy task, and the skills and techniques of psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists must be combined in a concerted effort to reach this goal.

About 70% of the individuals who committed antisocial acts were black citizens of a large U.S. urban area (Newark, N.J.). Some current and historical facts were observed and reviewed concerning the family and criminal behavior of both American and African blacks. Billingsley [1], in his book *Black Families in White America,* wrote

> Three facts stand out above all others concerning the American Blacks. First, these people came to this country from Africa and not from Europe. Secondly, they came in chains and were consequently uprooted from their cultural and family moorings. Third, they had been subjected to systematic exclusion from participation and influence in the major institutions of the American society even up to the present time.

Blacks under the tutelage of white Americans have long viewed their African background with a sense of "shame." It is interesting to note that according to current and historical facts, the most striking feature of the African family and community life was the strong and dominant place in family and society assigned to and assumed by the men. This strong, masculine dominance, however, far from being capricious authoritarianism, was supported, guided, and limited by custom and tradition that also provided a substantial role for the women. The children were provided with quality care and protection not common in modern societies, for they belonged not alone to their father and mother but also, and principally, to the wider kinship group.

Family life in Africa was patterned along several dimensions including descent, type of marriage, type of family (nuclear, extended), residential patterns, and patterns of child care and protection. There were three basic patterns of descent or kinship in Africa. The most common was patrilineal descent, in which kinship ties were ascribed only through the father's side of the family. The next most common pattern was matrilineal, in which the kinship was reckoned through the mother's side of the family. A third pattern, present in only a small part of Africa, mostly in the southern portion of the continent, was double-descent, in which kinship was reckoned through both the male and female. This pattern, the only one recognized in America, was virtually unknown in the part of West Africa from which American blacks came.

The African father, especially in West Africa, played a very important role in the care and protection of his children. The strong bonds that bind both fathers and mothers to their children are suggested by experiences of the Ashanti tribe [1]:

> In terms of personal behavior and attitude, there is no apparent difference between the relations of mother and children and those of father and children. The warmth, trust and affection frequently found uniting parents and offspring go harmoniously with the respect shown to both.

West Africans had a highly complex civilization. The family life patterns were closely knit, well organized, highly articulated with kin and community, and highly functional for the economic, social, and psychological life of the people. Thus, the men and women who were taken as slaves to the New World came from societies every bit as civilized and respectable as those of the Old World settlers who mastered them, but the two were very different types of society. The African family was much more closely integrated with the wider levels of kinship and society. The simple transition of millions of persons from Africa to America in itself would have been a major disruption in the lives of the people even if it had proceeded on a voluntary and humane basis. However, this transition, according to history, was far from simple, voluntary, and humane.

Slaves who were transported from Africa to the New World had their cultural life as well as their historical development completely disrupted. Since the African family was the primary unit of social organization, this kind of total discontinuity had a particular impact on the black family. They were confronted with an alien culture of European genesis. The slaves in the United States were converted from the free, independent human beings they

had been in Africa to property. They became chattels. This process of dehumanization started at the beginning of the slave-gathering process and was intensified with each stage along the way. It should not be difficult then to discern that people who have been told for 200 years in ways more effective than words that they are subhuman should begin to believe this themselves and internalize their values and pass them on to their children. The slave process continued and the blacks became progressively more disengaged from their cultures, their families, and their humanity.

It must be noted that the slave system in the United States had a crippling effect on the establishment, maintenance, and growth of normal patterns of family life among the black people. This system most likely caused the development of the five family defects contributing to most of the antisocial acts committed by blacks throughout their history in America. Suffice it to say that these five family deficiencies were also found in most of the white criminals and criminal offenders who had committed antisocial acts.

During a three-week period in Kenya, East Africa, several small groups of criminals were interviewed with the aid of Chief Inspector E. K. Githinji of the Nairobi Police Department. The five family deficiencies were present in most of these cases of criminality, but the number of these individuals was small compared to the number of individuals committing antisocial acts in the Newark area. The lower incidence of criminal acts was most likely attributed to the fact that the Nairobi citizens were of tribal ancestry, namely Kikiyus, Kipsigis, Massai, and Luos, in which powerful family influences, ties, and respect have been developed and maintained through the years.

Sutherland [2], in his text *Principles of Criminology*, stated:

> Family is potentially a most effective agency of control. It has exclusive contact with the child during a period of greatest dependency and greatest plasticity and continued intimate contact over a subsequent period of several years. No child is so rigidly fixed at birth that it must inevitably become a delinquent, or that it must inevitably be law-abiding. The homes which are close to either extreme in efficiency produce children whose behavior can be predicted with a high degree of precision. ...
> The task of child training was comparatively simple in early society but has become extremely difficult in modern life. In preliterate life, both parents were reared in the same simple harmonious culture as were also the grandparents, the other relatives, and the neighbors. The result was a steady and harmonious pressure upon the child which formed his character without difficulty and without conflicts. This is impossible in modern society. Parents are in conflict with each other because they have been raised in different environments, have read different books and magazines, and have heard different lectures and seen different movie films that have a bearing on child training. Parents are in conflict with grandparents, with school teachers, and even with motion picture actors. Moreover, parents are in conflict, probably more than previously, for the affection of the child. In this situation the simple, harmonious pressure of consistent authority is impossible.

It is important to observe that criminal acts of other members of the family are one of the important reasons why a particular child becomes delinquent. Burt [3] concluded from his study in England that vice and crime were present five times as frequently in the homes from which delinquents came as in the homes of nondelinquents. The Gluecks [4,5] reported that 84.8% of the offenders released from the Massachusetts Reformatory had been reared in homes in which there were other criminal members; also, they found that 86.7% of the juvenile delinquents including 80.7% of the female delinquents they studied were from such homes. In Chicago, Barker and Wright [6] found that the several geographic areas varied widely in the extent to which the delinquency of a child was associated with the delinquencies of other children and concluded the association between these two variables was a function of the community.

Homes disrupted by death, divorce, or desertion have generally been believed to be an important reason for delinquency of the children. In many instances the dynamic processes that have led to criminality in the family have been observed to be, first, the assimi-

lation by a child within the home, during observation of parents or other relatives, of the attitudes and codes and behavior patterns of delinquency. He then becomes delinquent because he has learned delinquency at home.

Second, a child may be driven from the home by unpleasant experiences and situations or withdraw from it because of the absence of pleasant experiences and thus cease to be a functioning member of an integrated group. He may run away from home or remain relatively isolated from the family even though he continues to eat and sleep at home. He does not, on this account, necessarily become a delinquent. The important element is that this isolation from the family is likely to increase his association with delinquency, which is the primary factor in delinquency.

Third, the home may fail to train the child to deal with community situations in a law-abiding manner. This failure may be due either to complete neglect of training or to overprotection. In either case the child fails to develop those inhibitions against delinquency that are supposed to be developed in the family life.

The fourth dynamic process may be in operation although it probably may not be important. This is the persistence in the general community of habits of disobedience formed in the home. Frequently, this is presented as an important factor in delinquency, either in common-sense terms of the failure of the child to develop habits of obedience or in psychiatric terms of the grudge against any authority. Both of these views assume that there is a generalized attitude toward authority.

Another process that is frequently suggested is the development of tensions and emotional disturbances in the home. Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have emphasized the Oedipus Complex as the principal source of delinquency. As is known, this complex consists of hatred of the father because of rivalry for the affections of the mother. Because the father is the authority in the home, the boy transfers hatred of authority when he becomes active in the outside community.

Attempts to prevent or modify criminality arising from disturbed family dynamics, as well as from the five major deficiencies as presented, can be made successfully by the employment of accepted family therapy techniques. Minuchin [7] states:

> The family therapist's function is to help the identified patient and the family by facilitating the transformation of the family system. ... This process includes three major steps. 1. The therapist joins the family in a position of leadership. 2. He unearths and evaluates the underlying family structure. 3. He creates circumstances that will allow the transformation of this structure.

In actual therapy these steps are inseparable. As a result of this therapy, the family is transformed. Changes are made in the set of expectations that govern its members' behavior. As a result the unconscious mind of each family member is altered, and the individual's experience itself changes. This transformation is significant for all family members, but particularly so for the identified patient who was freed from the deviant position. In family therapy, the transformation of structure is defined as changes in the position of family members vis-à-vis each other, with a consequent modification of their complementary demands. Although change and transformation are similar terms, in this context they have separate meanings. In family therapy, transformation, or the restructuring of the family system, leads to changes and, for the individuals, new experiences. Transformation usually does not change the composition of the family. The change occurs in the synapsis, the way in which the same people relate to each other. When the therapist joins the family, he assumes the leadership of the therapeutic system. This leadership involves responsibility for what happens. The therapist must assess the family and develop therapeutic goals based on that assessment. He must intervene in ways that facilitate the transformation of the family system in the direction of these goals. The target of his innovations is the family. Although individuals must not be ignored, the therapist's focus

is on enhancing the operation of the family system. The family will be the matrix of the healing and growth of its members. The responsibility for reaching this state, or for failing to do so, belongs to the therapist.

Some family therapists have been quite successful in altering delinquent behavior in patients through the medium of the family transformation technique.

Summary

During routine psychiatric evaluations over a nine-year period involving about 4500 to 5000 criminals it was observed that characteristic familial determinants pertaining to criminal behavior were present in about 90 to 95% of these individuals. These determinants were poverty, lack of family authority figures, rejection of the individual child, absence of family cohesiveness and diminished respect for the household unit, and loss of individual identity within the family. These five deficiencies seem to influence the development of delinquency at a high rate. This conclusion was corroborated by the presence of these factors in most of the psychosexual developmental histories of the patients. Other family dynamics noted in the development of criminality were (1) the child assimilating within his home the attitudes, codes, and behavior patterns of delinquency of parents or other relatives; (2) the child being driven from the home by unpleasant experiences and situations; (3) the home failing to train the child to deal with community situations in a law-abiding manner; (4) the persistence in the general community of habits of disobedience formed in the home; and (5) the development of tensions and emotional disturbances in the home.

It is suggested in this paper that most cases of criminality can be prevented by family therapy. One must keep in mind that in the early process of socialization families mold and program the child's behavior and sense of identity. Such processes may be geared to the prevention of criminality. Family therapy techniques can be directed at family deficiencies and the family dynamics that lead to the development of delinquent behavior.

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