CHARACTER IN YOUNG DELINQUENTS

AN APPROACH FROM THE CRIMINAL
GANG ASPECT *

BY

H. T. P. YOUNG, M.B., CH.B.

MEDICAL OFFICER, H.M. PRISON, WORMWOOD SCRUBS

In a recent publication¹ Professor McDougall has described character as "that part of the personality which is specially concerned in action, which manifests itself most clearly in the higher forms of volition, and which is gradually developed in and through social intercourse." Character, in this special sense, together with intelligence, temperament, disposition, and temper, constitutes the personality, in the opinion of this authority, and he is at pains to differentiate character from that which is represented by the "sum total of those features, properties, or qualities of an individual organism (or of a species or other natural group) which are peculiar to it and serve to distinguish it from other individuals, species, or groups." The first of these quotations forms the basis of the present study.

The great primary instincts, which may be regarded as forces causing prolonged states of psycho-physical tension, are the sources from which character, in common with other mental qualities, draws the energy upon which its activity depends. Among these instinctive forces are certain broad trends disposing the individual towards life within the community, and, in conjunction with the intelligence, determining the extent to which he is capable of adapting himself to it. Their object may be solely of a protective nature, or, as seems more probable, they may initiate and sustain a process by which the boundaries of the self-regarding sentiment are extended, and those ideals of conduct are acquired which are inaccessible to the individual but are essential to the evolution of the race.

It would appear, therefore, that in carrying out their functions, these trends act as a counterbalance to promptings of an asocial kind, which thus meet with obstructive influences both at instinctive levels and at higher ones. In these higher planes there is found a tendency to invent apparently logical reasons for the influences of instinct, and to attribute the ensuing impulse to those reasons, without always recognizing the fact that they are not the original motives. Conscious awareness of this process is, to some extent, inversely related to the strength of the emotional tone with which the fundamental urge was invested. In the case of motives of the herd type this mechanism appears to have been largely responsible for the development of codes of conduct which are acceptable to the community, and by means of which man satisfies himself that his attraction towards membership of the herd is the outcome of his reasoning and is subject to his volition. The prevalence of such codes, notwithstanding the wide dissimilarity to be found among them, suggests that their final cause is deep-seated, and that they are not merely conditions imposed on the individual in exchange for the privilege of living within the community to suit the requirements of the moment.

The presence of a fairly well-defined age-level at which the child's egocentric point of view is replaced by one in which social considerations predominate, and the advance from principles of a purely utilitarian nature to those based on ethical and moral sanctions, indicate a gradual process of identification with a progressively widening conception of community life. It is owing to the probability that small groupings are of an earlier evolutionary period than large ones that they are more closely knit and their presence within the larger herd is possible. Domestic allegiance, as the first to be acquired, is the most permanent, and the closer the identification with it the more difficult is its extension to the general community apt to be.

Experience shows that, provided the objective is sufficiently attractive and distinct, it is not a difficult matter

to evoke a strong morale in adolescents, many of whom may have had little or no previous knowledge of the significance of group membership. Experience also shows, however, that, as a result of treatment, where the greater rigidity of the rules and conventions of a small group has been found to be particularly suited to the lad's attainments his subsequent adjustment to the community at large may be one of considerable difficulty. It is probable that, among youths of this type, gang delinquency, where a common risk is shared, provides an objective, and the reduction in the feeling of personal responsibility which accompanies adherence to a group supplies an incentive and helps to unite its members. The racing gang, which was much in evidence a few years ago, is an example of anti-social grouping of this kind, and in convicts serving terms of penal servitude, where the environmental factor is more prominent, a similar uniformity of emotion is attained.

HEREDITY, ENVIRONMENT, AND THE DELINQUENT

The relative importance of environment and heredity in the causation of crime has recently been tested by Professor Lange² in mono-zygotic and di-zygotic twins; the former, in the proportion of ten to three, were found to show a close resemblance in the nature of the offences committed by each twin, while in the latter, in the proportion of seventeen to two, the position was reversed. The limited effect of environment was also shown in a further comparison between these dissimilar twins and other siblings.

Whatever instinct is sufficiently dynamic to obtrude itself with abnormal force and frequency tends to provoke in the mind of its possessor, to a corresponding degree, a feeling of antagonism to his surroundings, which is apt to affect his attitude towards the community. On the other hand, where all instincts are relatively weak, the environment would appear confused and perplexing, not infrequently leading the subject to take a fatalistic view of his position.

The foregoing suggestions, even when full allowance is made for the selective action of the individual on his environment, do not afford an adequate explanation of the increase in adolescent crime which occurs during periods of economic difficulty. It is upon the feeling of uncertainty and apprehensiveness concerning the future, arising from the persistency of large-scale social problems such as those of industrialism, that responsibility for this appears to rest, for the necessity for social equilibrium and continuity of purpose is at no time more urgent than in the unstable period of adolescence. Adjustment, in the absence of certain standards by which to effect it, is thus rendered more difficult, and maladjustment, in these circumstances, is conducive of crime, if it may not be said to be synonymous with it.

The effect of an adverse environment can only be measured in general terms, but with the object of ascertaining the local environmental influences which are detrimental to the adolescent, and the features which affect his susceptibility to them, a large number of young offenders have been systematically examined. One thousand of the records of these cases have been taken to form a background for the subject at present under review. Included in this number are thirty groups or gangs, in which three or more lads were concerned together, totalling one hundred cases. In every case the homes from which they came were visited by experienced field workers, and a detailed account of the family history was obtained from the parent or guardian. Observations on the condition of the home and its surroundings, and full particulars of the health, morbid conduct, companionships, employments, and amusements were recorded in the form of cross-sections at different age-levels. This, and the parent's opinion of the lad's reaction to these influences, were compared with the statements obtained from the lad himself, and the opinions formed in his medical examination.

As a result of this investigation no striking departure from the normal was found, except in connexion with physical and mental development. Standardized physical measurements disclosed a slight but definite inferiority

*Part of a paper read at a meeting of the Chelsea Clinical Society, January 17th, 1933. Published with the consent of H.M. Prison Commissioners, although not necessarily representing their views.

in physique, which, although not accompanied by signs of disease or a history of past illness in excess of the normal, indicated a possible reason for concerted, as opposed to individual, actions. To some extent, however, this reduction in the standard was discounted by the relatively high degree of vital capacity which Dreyer's method of estimation revealed.³ The mental age, when compared with that of the prison control group, showed an average reduction of two years, the figures being 12 and 14 years respectively. In this connexion it may be noted that in the investigation of Doctors Grierson and Rixon in 1926,⁴ into the intelligence of the ordinary adult male remand prisoner of not more than 35, the average mental age was also found to be 14, this figure being equal to that ascertained in the general population by the authors of the *Report on Mental Deficiency* of the Boards of Education and Control in 1929. The incidence of mental or temperamental abnormalities in the family histories of the present cases amounted to 20 per cent.

No remarkable difference was found between the adolescent offenders examined and the average lad in respect of home conditions and upbringing. In the absence of figures relating to a control investigation on a comparable scale among law-abiding persons of similar age and status, and bearing in mind that investigators elsewhere have found a bad environment in 58 per cent. of their criminal cases,⁶ this statement is made with reserve. In so far, however, as it is possible to gauge correctly what constitutes favourable or unfavourable conditions in the home and upbringing of delinquents, and to make comparison with the home and upbringing of non-delinquents, there are good grounds for supposing this statement to be true. In almost every case in the present series the lad's reaction to these conditions was tolerant. It cannot be said that other environmental influences, such as companionships, were as favourable, for in 37 per cent. the associates were unsatisfactory, and many of the cases showed little sign of resistance to their influence.

INSTINCTS AND DELINQUENCY

Physical, mental, and environmental conditions, however, are not individually accountable for more than a small percentage of the total crimes committed. The majority of offences, as would be supposed, depend on the interaction between certain inherited traits and combinations of external influences which bring about situations favourable to the exhibition of those traits. Among these inherited tendencies the self-assertive instinct takes a prominent place, and the investigation showed that in about half the cases it was finding expression in an immature manner, while the fact that crimes against property accounted for 90 per cent. of the offences indicated the channel through which it emerged. Destitution, on the other hand, was only present in one of the cases, and clearly had little influence on the general result. Acquisitive crime, however, is not the prerogative of the gang delinquent, for it occurred in 96 per cent. of the prison control group. The urge to compete with and rival others, the fear of risking taunts, and the desire for adventure, may find expression in games or club competitions, but, in the absence of adequate drainage through ordinary channels, they can also be satisfied by acts of delinquency with others. A state of physical and mental inferiority, in association with a relatively high vital capacity, apart from other reasons, tends to create an increased demand for compensation of one kind or another. That the acts were of a boyish or childish nature in approximately half of the total number of cases, although the average chronological age was 18.2, suggests, however, that those who committed them showed a considerable delay in the development of the normal adolescent outlook, so far as the self-assertive instinct is concerned, and, incidentally, that personal rivalry was a frequent objective. This, in conjunction with the fact that in roughly one-third of the cases acquisitiveness was estimated to be of low potential energy, supports the view that in a large percentage the crimes were not the direct result of persistent acquisitive urges.

If it be admitted, then, that certain gang features in delinquency can be attributed to the self-assertive instinct, the theory that all such formations arise from

one instinctive source cannot be sustained, unless the view be held that, because of its anti-social nature, it is therefore not a true type of grouping. Such a view, however, does not take into account that appetite satisfaction, followed by personal and social rivalry, is believed to be the normal sequence in the evolution of instinctive trends towards socialization. In throwing in his lot with a gang it is suggested that the lad is, in fact, activated by these trends, however immature his sense of social obligation may be, and that his association is neither fortuitous, as a rule, nor attributable to a purposive attempt to counteract his physical and mental inferiority, if indeed he appreciates it. This conclusion is supported by the high incidence of gregariousness as a natural tendency of the personality. The limited extent of the delinquents' identification with the gangs was disclosed by their reaction after arrest, when sixty-six showed that their sympathies were but loosely attached.

RATIONALIZATION AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE CRIMINAL

In other circumstances, in order to relieve themselves of a position which is causing them uneasiness owing to a difference of views, individuals tend to gravitate towards an association where the system of opinions is more nearly in accord with their own, or, failing this, to convince themselves that the retention of membership of the group is based on grounds of reason. Reference has already been made to this mechanism by which an instinctive impulse may be invested with the qualities of an impulse which is based on rational grounds. In the majority of young offenders the quality of the act is poor, but the necessity to justify their conduct is generally present. An extreme instance of this search for justification occurs in older prisoners who have been convicted on a capital charge, and whose death sentences have subsequently been commuted to terms of penal servitude, where, given a suitable predisposition, a psychosis may be built up on an assumption of innocence which is the outcome of a rationalization. This assumption is not infrequently reinforced by the defending counsel's argument, and also by the remission of the death sentence.⁷ Prisoners of this type are very rarely recidivists.

The treatment of the young delinquent may fall short of its object owing to the action of this process of involuntary self-deception. He may genuinely desire to overcome his anti-social tendencies and to give his confidence to those who are guiding him, but the fact that in many cases his object is to secure the privileges which a place in society would afford him, without fully realizing their nature and the obligations they entail, supplies the reason for his return to irregular conduct when the advantages he expects are not forthcoming. In other words, he wants to be compensated for the abandonment of his anti-social propensities, and he is aggrieved when his imaginary contract is not honoured. He generally fails to realize, however, that he has weighed in the balance of experience the advantages and disadvantages, in his present position, of the more or less direct gratification of his self-assertive urges, and has found that the latter preponderate. The result is a temporary adaptation to circumstances which is incapable of withstanding the stresses which his liberty will impose on it.

The tendency to bargain, both consciously and subconsciously, is unusually well marked in the recidivist, who often appears to believe that his adaptation to his prison surroundings is a concession on his part which should be reciprocated on the part of society, and, if the tendency is less often due to vanity in the young offender, and is less often consciously employed by him, its underlying influence is not infrequently observed. Where, as is sometimes seen in the premature abandonment of resistance by the institutionalized adolescent, a repression of self-assertive impulses occurs, this tendency to bargain disappears, leaving behind it a deep and permanent anti-social bias.

RATIONALIZATION AND CHARACTER FORMATION

Rationalization is not a mechanism confined to the unintelligent. It necessitates the presence of a thought process of a quality which is capable of checking the direct

emergence of crude instinctive forces, and so of modifying the demands of the individual. These rationalizations range from those which are designed to meet the exigencies of the moment to those which involve considerations of a high order. The recognition of the fact that a modification of conduct so obtained requires the submission of the motive to a tribunal over which the individual has no control, thereby recognizing its authority over him, is in the province of the intellect. It is also a function of the intellect to modify the rationalizations in the interests of the individual. The willingness to make the submission, and the refusal to acquiesce in a compromise, between the demand of a primitive instinct and the verdict of the tribunal, or, as a result of such compromise, to forfeit any part of personal responsibility for acts contemplated or committed, requires the presence of another faculty. This faculty, although closely connected with it, is not a part of the intellect in that it presupposes the active existence of a principle which is independent of experience. It is thought that this principle can be acquired as a result of the identification of the individual with the social and ethical standards of a composite body with which he is in sympathy. Roback⁸ suggests that this principle is an abstract conception which he calls justice, interposing it between reason and act, a point of view which would appear to be incomplete in that, if rationalization be accepted as one of the criteria of character, it implies a recognition of the right of others to criticize the motives of the individual, and so of a desire on the part of the individual to conciliate what he regards as paramount in public opinion. Justice, furthermore, has not that closer relation to the prime purpose of the group which McDougall's "active sympathy" connotes.⁹

The tribunal itself is some part of the environment of the individual, but whether it be domestic, tribal, or not, his recognition of its authority identifies him as a member of a social organism composed of like-minded persons, and the structure of this organism determines the mode in which it must express itself, and therefore the quality of the character of its members.

The community is represented at the lowest end of the scale by the social problem class, as described in the report of the Boards of Education and Control. This class is distinguished by its mental inefficiency and its incapacity for social adjustment, and is estimated to form 10 per cent. of the population. While not in itself composed of mentally defective persons, it is believed to supply in its descendants a large proportion of actual defectives, recidivists, prostitutes, and unemployables. The prevalence of strong egocentric tendencies, such as is found among recidivists, would render adaptation of considerably greater difficulty, even in the lowest social environment, than would be the case in a member of a group where some recognition of the principle of common ownership obtained, whether or not this were limited by inferior intelligence or poorly adjusted self-assertive tendencies.

It was evident from the investigation into the records of the cases that gang delinquents, as a whole, do not spring from this class. It may therefore be inferred that they, as a type, exhibit an innate capacity for character development in advance of that of habitual offenders as a class and of members of the social problem group, although such capacity is usually of a low grade.

The present study shows that a complete examination of a case in all its aspects, together with full corroborative evidence from other sources, must be undertaken if an accurate estimate of the character of an individual is to be obtained.

REFERENCES

- ¹ McDougall: Of the Words Character and Personality, *Character and Personality*, vol. i, No. 1.
- ² Lange: *Crime as Destiny*, 1931.
- ³ Dreyer: *The Assessment of Physical Fitness*, 1920.
- ⁴ Grierson and Rixon: *Lancet*, August 7th, 1926.
- ⁵ Report of Mental Deficiency Committee, Board of Education and Board of Control, 1929.
- ⁶ Good: The Danger in our Midst: Crime and Abnormality, *Howard Journal*, 1932, iii, No. 3.
- ⁷ Young: Observations on the Prison Psychoses, *Journal of Mental Science*, January, 1927.
- ⁸ Roback: *The Psychology of Character*, 1931.
- ⁹ McDougall: *An Outline of Psychology*, 1931 edition.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH YEAR

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The period covered by the fourteenth Annual Report of the Ministry of Health* represents the first full year to have been affected throughout by the economy measures which followed the financial crisis of the autumn of 1931. In the part of the report which concerns the health services, however, there is not much reflection of any unusual stringency. The Ministry quite early made it clear that there was no intention that local authorities should embark on any wholesale and ill-considered cutting down of expenditure on essential health services. In the present report, in dealing with maternity and child welfare, pleasure is expressed that returns from local authorities show no sign of any reduction in these services on the ground of economy, and that they indicate a gradual development throughout the country.

"He [the Minister] would regard as ill-considered any contraction of existing services or any failure to pursue a policy of steady development for the essential needs of these services, and in particular he would regret any short-sighted reduction of the skilled services engaged in this work, such as those of medical officers or health visitors, which would lessen the advice and assistance available for the nursing and expectant mothers and children who come within the scope of the services."

Under the heading of "National Health Insurance" we have already dealt with the section of the report which concerns insurance practice (see *Supplement*, August 19th, p. 145); the other sections have to do with public health, housing and town planning, local government finance, and administration of the Poor Law. We learn that at the end of last year there were 21,275 beds available for the treatment of tuberculosis in institutions belonging to local authorities in England, and 8,151 in approved institutions belonging to voluntary bodies. The number of new cases of pulmonary tuberculosis given in the returns for England and Wales for 1932 was 51,836, and of non-pulmonary 17,956, the lowest figures since the present method of making returns was adopted ten years ago. The deaths also—27,627 from pulmonary and 6,031 from non-pulmonary tuberculosis—were the lowest ever recorded. The death rate is 687 and 150 respectively per million of population.

The attendance at the 177 approved treatment centres for venereal disease during the year reached a total of 2,984,270—somewhat in advance of the previous year. The number of new cases found to be suffering from venereal disease was 50,824, a fall of some 1,600, equivalent to a decrease in the number of new cases of syphilis of 2.98 per cent., and of new cases of gonorrhoea of 2.67 per cent.

With regard to infectious diseases, there were increases in the number of notified cases of dysentery, enteric fever (including paratyphoid fevers), and scarlet fever. The deaths from scarlet fever, however, were fewer, though measles and German measles, as to which no case figures are given, showed a higher mortality. The noteworthy features of the year were the continued high incidence of, and mortality from, cerebro-spinal fever (2,136 cases and 1,213 deaths), the further reduction in the incidence of, and mortality from, diphtheria (43,399 cases and 2,340 deaths, as against 50,236 cases and 2,673 deaths in 1931), the large increase in the incidence of, and mortality from, acute poliomyelitis and acute poliomyelitis, and the continued decline in the incidence of small-pox, of which there were only 2,039 cases in 1932, with three deaths. The number of deaths from small-pox was the lowest recorded since 1918. The vaccination figures relate to 1931, the latest year for which complete information is available. Only 39 per cent. of the children born during that year were vaccinated, and the declarations of conscientious objection equalled 46.7 per cent. of the total births. Several cases of leprosy came to the notice of the Ministry during the year, the disease having in each case been contracted

* Fourteenth Annual Report of the Ministry of Health, 1932-3. H.M. Stationery Office. (5s. net.)