Why Socialisation is Key to Understanding Delinquency

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Abbreviations: APD: Antisocial Personality Disorder; CD: Conduct Disorder; DSM: Diagnostic Statistical Manual; ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development; HRD: Human Resources Development.

Introduction

Delinquency is a generic term used to label a variety of petty offences committed by young individuals. Although these crimes have been labelled as petty or offences of a less serious kind they nevertheless consist of antisocial behaviours which sometimes cause undue distress to other people. Adolescents loitering in the streets dealing drugs to children are not only enacting an illicit antisocial act but are behaving in a morally offensive way. A child who continuously knocks on his neighbour's door then runs away is not committing a crime. If, however, this behaviour causes the neighbour to have a 'nervous breakdown' then a moral transgression has occurred. Antisocial behaviour can also be perceived as deviant. As Taylor points out, 'Differentiating between criminal behaviour and what is simply considered antisocial, deviant or morally offensive behaviour is a difficult task' (p. 49). There are many different types of delinquent crimes such as shoplifting, petty burglary, vandalism and criminal damage but delinquency can also take the form of loitering in gangs, drunk and disordered behaviour and being disruptive at antisocial hours [1].

An early example of a delinquent is Baby Face Nelson who was part of a gang of hoodlums in Chicago 1922. At the age of 14 he was convicted of car theft but as an adult he progressed to armed robbery. Delinquents are not restricted to the USA of course – Britain too has had a youth problem as highlighted by the BBC News Reporter, Peter Gould in 2005 [2]. He announced that Britain was becoming a 'yob culture' where youths get drunk and start fighting each other. It was argued that these young individuals had no respect for the law or orderly behaviour and behaved in a disrespectful manner. More recently, we have seen an increase in knife crime in the UK leading to a rise in levels of inner-city anxiety [3]. Delinquency, however, is a form of antisocial behaviour that is a universally shared problem. It crosses cultural boundaries and can be thought of as a product of an inappropriate socialisation process. More specifically delinquency can be traced back to a failure of the instilment of an appropriate moral code.

Why Do Delinquents Behave This Way?

Why delinquents commit the offences they do is an interesting question which criminological psychologists have tried to answer. We could ask if this bears any relationship with how they are socialised given that the family has an important role in socialising their children to abide by the values and morals set by society. The socialisation process is embedded in a series of family social factors. Throughout the early stages of development parents provide care and love designed to help pre-adjust the child for life. Parents act as role models for their children to emulate and hopefully the behaviours modelled are positive and conform to society's mores. Therefore learning starts in the home. This learning is enforced through parental discipline and supervision. The family as a whole can be involved in the

control over 'wild' adolescents for instance which is particularly important given that siblings can also act as role models. The importance of the family in the development of children's values and morals has been highlighted by Rutter and Giller (1983) in their consideration of five key adverse factors. Rutter and Giller's five key adverse factors have played an important role in understanding delinquency. Effectively, these factors contribute individually and collectively in an incremental manner, such that the more factors present the greater the delinquent behaviour exhibited [4].

One important factor in the development of delinquency is parental criminality. Based on his study of 120 Birmingham families in England, Wilson [5] showed that criminal activities run in families. 47 per cent of these families had at least one convicted parent. For 56 out of the 120 families who had one convicted parent 180 or 45 per cent of sons were also convicted. Alongside parental criminality, West and Farrington [6,7] unearthed a host of factors contributing towards boy juvenile delinquency in their Cambridge Study. They discovered that sons of criminal fathers were twice as likely to be delinquent than sons of fathers with no convictions. These boys tended to burgle, steal from cars and rob from unsuspecting victims with other boys who were like-minded. In 2001 Farrington and co-workers re-examined some of the high risk childhood factors for delinquency and, as with the initial findings of 1973 and 1977, having a convicted family member featured highly. Fathers, brothers or sisters with convictions predicted delinquency and convictions of the boys. Farrington et al. [8] studied 1,517 boys across grades one, four and seven for antisocial behaviour. They found that 597 of those arrested were from identified criminal families. The likelihood of another member of the same family being arrested increased if one relative had previously been arrested. Although Farrington et al. found that all relatives who had been arrested influenced delinquency in these boys it was the father's arrest that was most influential. One explanation they offered was intergenerational continuity. In effect multiple risk factors were present such as poverty, parental discord and criminality. Parental criminality, they argued, could arise from assortative mating whereby male offenders have female offenders as their partner. They further propose that these parents use ineffective nurturing strategies creating inappropriate socialisation and poor moral development in their children.

Problems with family relationships such that there is a high level of parental discord also impacts on the developing child. Children subjected to a home environment where there is domestic abuse and parental conflict feel insecure and frightened. They may also feel neglected and rejected as the parents are absorbed by their own personal and relationship difficulties. Hence, when children are neglected and rejected, they are less likely to receive guidance and appropriate boundaries of behavioural appropriateness. Without these boundaries of behavioural appropriateness they might be more likely to misbehave and demonstrate antisocial tendencies such as taunting vulnerable individuals in the neighbourhood. The type of discipline approach plays an important role. According to Parke and Gauvain [9] parenting that is ineffective can cause future problems for the developing child. If parenting involves coercion as a form of discipline then the child is likely to adopt this form of behaviour and, in so doing, continues the cycle of mutually coercive behaviour. This can have an impact on other family members such as younger siblings where older siblings use this coercive behaviour towards them. This, coupled with delinquent behaviour, can entice younger siblings to model on their older brothers and sisters [10]. Hence, parental nurturance can continue across the generations [11]. A number of parental discipline styles, some of which can lead to later behavioural problems, have been identified.

First, the authoritarian style, which is a form of rejecting and demanding or controlling discipline, tends to cause children to resent their parents and show rebellious behaviour towards society. Moreover, if this harsh and 'loveless' punishment is inconsistent children can develop an aggressive and hostile disposition [12-14]. Such rejection can lead to intergenerational transmission of hostile and ineffective parenting [11]. Second, lenient and loving (indulgent) disciplinary approaches can lead to poor socialisation as these children are allowed to operate without any boundaries and can become unruly. The message these children receive is that they are always right and can do what they want without incurring sanctions. Third, children who are ignored and rejected (neglected style) also develop poor socialisation skills. These children have not been taught what appropriate behaviour is and often demonstrate a poor level of moral understanding, rule adoption and moral behaviour. Fourth and finally, an authoritative discipline style combines affection through appropriate boundaries via explanation and discussion rather than physical punishment. This is considered to be the most affective style. Ginsburg et al. have argued that authoritative discipline facilitates moral development and children with a prosocial disposition [15].

There are other factors which peripherally impinge on the way socialisation is delivered. These include the size of the family and socio-economic status. In the case of family

size, the larger the family the less able parents are to supervise their children effectively simply because they have difficulty dividing their attention equally. Patterson [14] has argued that ineffective supervision is linked to delinquency. When parents lose sight of whom their children are associating with and where they are, it becomes difficult to monitor peer selection. Ladd [16] has highlighted the connection between the rejection of non-delinquent peers and the onset of a delinquent pathway. Socio-economic status implies that children from poorer families are likely to live in impoverished environments where criminality is more common. In 2005, Neill conducted a survey of schools experiencing a preponderance of pupils showing delinquent behaviours [17]. The survey results indicated that delinquent behaviour was common in schools in low socio-economic areas. This also means that children in such areas are more likely to be exposed to delinquent peers– such as older peers who use young children as 'drug mules' or who threaten with violence if they refuse to cooperate [18]. Delinquent gangs fighting against other delinquent gangs are increasingly common in the UK where knife crimes are the norm for such delinquently inclined youths [3]. Coie comments on how antisocially inclined children will seek other antisocial children which can lead to a life of deviancy [19].

These findings suggest that if a child is inappropriately socialised to believe that it is okay to be disrespectful to other individuals and to contravene the law, then he or she will behave in an antisocial manner and adopt a value system that is in conflict with the cultural values and morals held by society. Amongst those who engage in delinquent behaviour there is a subset that has been diagnosed with a psychological disorder. These include individuals who are antisocial and have received a diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD) or antisocial personality disorder (APD) using guidelines from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual version 5 (DSM-5). What appears to link CD and APD is the poor development of morals and ability to empathise with the plight of others [20]. Pardini and Fite consider a diagnosis of CD as a robust predictor of later antisocial behaviour [21]. It has been argued that CD is a precursor of APD. Parents who have children with CD find it difficult to socialise and discipline them. This, in part, explains the poor socialisation of these children and their refusal to internalise moral rules and exhibit moral behaviour. This pattern of behaviour extends into adulthood where they are considered to have APD. There are different explanations for why these children behave this way but they are beyond the scope of this brief. What can be concluded from DSM-5, however, is that these children exhibit antisocial behaviour from a very young age which

may progress into adulthood despite the efforts of parents to socialise and discipline them. Odgers et al. claimed, however, that the provision of a positive home environment can reduce the probability of developing CD or attenuating its disruptiveness [22].

Theoretical Accounts of Moral Development within Socialisation

Psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg [23,24] and Leon Vygotsky [25,26] have introduced theoretical accounts of how moral development occurs. At the centre of both approaches is the notion of learning what is right from wrong as a consequence of chronological development in conjunction with social support. In the case of Kohlberg, children progress through stages of moral complexity and sophistication which depends both on age (biological development) and social monitoring and approval. Vygotsky, alternatively, considers the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) which depends on the age of understanding (a biological element) but can be malleable through social interaction. Hence, a child can develop beyond their ZPD ability with the help of an agent such as a caregiver. Such caregivers typically use verbal explanation and present as role models who demonstrate actions for problem solving and appropriate behaviour. For Vygotsky, this social interaction provides a form of 'scaffolding'. It is important to realise that the type of scaffolding provided can vary cross culturally depending upon societal conventions. Such conventions are highly dependent upon legal, social and moral systems of a given society. How this varies can be examined via a systems theory approach.

The systems theory approach considers the family as a dynamic unit. This implies that the child is socialised by the caregiver and the rest of the family. Therefore all members of the family can be involved in the socialisation process – leading to intergenerational transmission of familial and societal norms, mores and values [27,28]. During the later stages of the socialisation process other formal socialisation agents can facilitate further acceptance of societal norms, mores and values such as the mass media [29]. According to the systems approach, societies operate under a multitude of organised systems which are founded on conventions [30]. There are legal conventions which, when transgressed as is the case with delinquency, receive appropriately levelled sanctions. Legal and social conventions vary cross culturally and tend to be socially driven. Moral conventions alternatively depend on the intrinsic interaction between individuals and operate separately from the enveloping culture. For example, a social interaction which results in one individual being harmed as a consequence of another's

behaviour will be universally frowned upon and sanctioned in some way – usually by the law. Hence, moral transgressions are considered wrong, are punishable and are universally frowned on independent of authority. Van Bavel et al. believe that children tend to evaluate moral transgressions quickly as a consequence of a primed process [31].

Socialisation is considered an important factor in teaching self-regulation in infants between 12-18 months of age – known as the control phase. During this time parents teach children how to behave appropriately through instruction. Infants learn how to modulate their emotional and behavioural outbursts through this parental intervention. Self-regulation will traverse parental control through to a phase of self-control [32]. A regular finding in the case of delinquent children is this lack of development of self-control. Therefore the question posed is whether self-control is key to moral development. It is easy to see how a connection between the acquisition of self-regulation and self-control can help the child develop a moral self [33]. And likewise how poorly developed self-regulation and self-control can lead a child down the path of delinquency.

So What Can Be Done to Reverse This Trend?

If such early criminal behaviour is related to problems of socialisation it might be argued that young people can be re-educated to alter their view of what constitutes socially acceptable behaviour and hence their moral code. Once this has been achieved through appropriate socialisation then the re-integration of mainstream values entertained by society will follow. This might sound an easy process but the chances are that the family is experiencing problems leading to dysfunction. Therefore the family may need assistance from social and psychological services. A crime prevention report called, 'It's Never Too Early, It's Never Too Late' identified risk factors which included family breakdown and drug-addicted parents. The sentiment of the report was to identify families that are failing to socialise their children appropriately, for whatever reason, and to introduce these vulnerable families to necessary social and psychological services as a means of preventing their children from becoming further involved with antisocial behaviour.

Psychologists draw upon many different therapeutic approaches such as the Carkhuff's Human Resources Development (HRD) model where expert counsellors teach delinquents appropriate social and personal skills to improve how they relate to other people. The Reasoning and Rehabilitation Project was designed to improve social skills including moral reasoning. Psychologists provide

delinquents with verbal instructions of appropriate behaviour that they can use as part of a self-instructional training regime. Some success has been achieved among delinquent shoplifters [34].

Concluding Thoughts

The teaching of moral reasoning has helped delinquents reduce their antisocial behaviour and to replace their inappropriate value mind-set with one endorsed by society. Hence with appropriate socialisation, improvements to the development of moral understanding can be achieved by delinquents. Moral understanding is important for the inhibition of disruptive and disrespectful behaviour which is why socialisation is crucial in the development of a respect for society's values and its prescribed behavioural decorum.

Acknowledgements

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