

The Relationship Between Severity of Personality Disorder and Certain Adverse Childhood Influences

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This paper reports the result of an investigation into the hypothesis that severity of personality disturbance is positively related to the frequency of certain early adverse childhood influences.

The relationship between early adverse childhood influences, particularly maternal separation, and later delinquency or personality disturbance has been the subject of increasing numbers of studies in this century, but the above hypothesis does not appear to have been tested. Barbara Wootton, in her critical survey (22) of studies on maternal separation claims that results show only that "as things are at present, children have a better chance of finding dependable love in families than in institutions". It remains to be proved, she states, that maternal separation *per se* is a "pathogenic factor" as Bowlby (1) would claim. Her conclusion explicitly rejects Bowlby's fundamental postulates: "That damage (caused by maternal separation) is lifelong or irreversible, that maternal deprivation is a major factor in criminal behaviour, or that the younger the child the greater the risk, all these must be regarded as quite unproven hypotheses" (p. 156). Wootton finds the evidence for a link between maternal separation and actual delinquency particularly weak. No study, she claims, has shown unequivocally that delinquents receive more than their due of maternal separation, or that separated children are disproportionately delinquent, whilst some studies suggest that the maternal separation hypothesis should be rejected (2, 12). Certain work however (3, 11, 12), does suggest that paternal separation is perhaps equally important, but no convincing relationship between paternal absence and later development of

delinquency or psychopathy has yet been demonstrated.

Recently Siri Naess (17) has noted that the incidence of mother-separation during childhood varied markedly in the different groups of delinquents investigated by him, and has suggested that this was related to the unequal severity of delinquency in the groups studied, but no detailed comparisons are given. Illegitimacy, usually denoting absence of a father, and often associated with other adverse factors such as maternal hostility, has been repeatedly shown to be correlated with maladjustment (12, 13) and psychopathy (16). Pringle found 14 per cent. of boys and 17 per cent. of girls in 2,593 maladjusted children in residential schools to be illegitimate compared with a 4.7 per cent. national average. In Lewis' 500 Kentish children removed from home, of whom 76 per cent. were maladjusted, 23 per cent were illegitimate. Illegitimacy was also noted to correlate with reconvictions in a recent series of 100 admissions to a psychopathic unit, a high proportion of the illegitimate belonging to the more severe approved school transfers in the series (8).

The incidence of patients giving a positive history of previous brain damage has repeatedly been shown to be high in groups of delinquents and psychopaths (15, 16, 17, 18). Although some of these early papers are very vague in their definitions, specific examples of temporal and frontal lobe damage make it clear that damage to particular areas of the brain can be responsible for certain personality disorders (9, 14, 20).

Many other early adverse childhood experiences have been noted by recent investigators, notably the Gluecks, but maternal and paternal

separation, illegitimacy and brain damage have been used in this study, which follows from one published earlier (4), partly because with these factors patients' accounts can be readily checked from their documents, and partly because this was intended as a pilot study.

METHOD USED TO TEST INITIAL HYPOTHESIS

As a result of the activities of the Balderton Psychopathic Unit (4, 5, 6, 7) the authors were brought into contact with six groups of males, all of whom were over I.Q. 60 on testing. Firstly, there were 76 Special Hospital patients in Rampton, Moss Side or Broadmoor Hospitals. These contained 21 patients described previously (4) transferred to these hospitals on the grounds of extreme behaviour disorder, 12 youths with psychopathic disorder aged 17-25 within Rampton in 1961, and 43 male admissions from 1960-61 to Moss Side. As each series was made up of consecutive case notes and was unselected except for I.Q. there is not felt to be any bias in adding them together.

The second and third groups consisted of 100 consecutive admissions for delinquency with mental disorder to the Balderton Unit (7) together with one extra patient included in a further series (8). These were divided into two groups, Balderton "A" comprising 21 approved school transfers and Balderton "B", 80 further patients mainly on probation.

The fourth group studied consisted of all 28 boys resident at a junior approved school during the winter 1960-61, whilst the fifth group comprised the 68 boys resident at an intermediate approved school in May, 1962. One of us was consultant psychiatrist to both these schools, which contained predominantly Northern English children. Group six consisted of 24 boys aged 15-23 connected with a Nottingham youth club in an area from which many of the Balderton psychopaths came and to which many were discharged. These youths were selected as being those prepared to be subjects for a research project.

Eighty-eight per cent. of patients were studied by one of us (M.C.), 12 per cent. by the other (G.S.) using the same defined criteria. An additional group of 50 grammar and 50

secondary modern schoolboys aged 15 was studied by one of us (G.S.); in this group only part of the above data were obtained, and are therefore appended at the end of the results.

To investigate the hypothesis, the groups were placed in order of severity of behaviour disturbance. There was little doubt that the Special Hospital patients contained the most severe psychopaths, for a substantial proportion were in this category under the Mental Health Act, or that those who had had to be transferred to Balderton from approved schools on the grounds of behaviour disturbance should come second. It was decided to place the probationers in Balderton third, for these youths had been sent by courts to Balderton rather than to approved schools on the ground of psychopathic traits, and the observed level of behaviour disturbance came above the observed level of the Approved schoolboys. It was more difficult to place the youngsters in the Junior Approved School, for although the disturbances shown by these boys were extreme they were also most changeable at this age. The Intermediate Approved schoolboys were found to contain many "simple" situational delinquents from big cities, and so these and the Nottingham youth club boys came fifth and sixth. The Secondary Modern and Grammar schoolboy group is seventh, but probably contains bias for social class and intelligence.

Having placed the groups in order, the initial hypothesis was checked by using adverse childhood influences chosen to be as objective as possible. These consisted of periods of a year or more of absence of mother or father during childhood up to 10 years old; illegitimacy; and brain damage defined as previous encephalitis or meningitis, properly documented birth injury, or road or civil accident causing hospital admission and unconsciousness for longer than an hour. These factors were analysed from the casenotes and checked from other documents, and direct from the patients, most of whom were under the senior author's care.

RESULTS

In this section the groups are ranked according to the frequency of the adverse factors found from casenotes and personal

examination. The rankings found are compared with the rankings predicted on the ground of severity of personality disorder.

The seven groups, ranked in expected order of least severity of personality disturbance, are shown in Table I.

Table II shows the results of ranking the groups according to the proportions having no parental deprivation (col. A), no illegitimacy (col. B), no brain damage (col. C), and none of these (col. D).

There is strong evidence of a connection between severity of delinquency and some combination of parental deprivation, illegitimacy and brain damage. The predicted rank and that in column D are identical, and the ranking of column A agrees significantly with

the predicted ranking (at 99 per cent. confidence level using Spearman's rank correlation test).

In Table III the average number of years of absence of each boy's mother and father during 0-10 years of age is listed, together with rankings alongside.

The table suggests that the duration of absence might also contribute to a significant ranking, but in fact ranking only becomes significant when the average duration of absence of both mother and father is summed. Such a sum is of doubtful validity, since where both parents are absent the absence of one is probably related to the absence of the other. Dividing the duration of absence into that occurring from 0-5 and 5-10 years of age, the average absence was equally distributed be-

TABLE I

	Average Age	No. in Sample	Predicted Rank
Secondary modern and grammar schoolboys	15.5	100	1
Youth club	18.7	24	2
Intermediate approved school	15.2	68	3
Junior approved school	11.3	28	4
Balderton B	23.0	80	5
Balderton A	19.6	21	6
Special hospitals	26.0	76	7

TABLE II

	A		B		C		D			
	No Parental Deprivation		No Illegitimacy		No Brain Damage		No Parental Deprivation Illegitimacy or Brain Damage			
	No.	Pro-portion Rank	No.	Pro-portion Rank	No.	Pro-portion Rank	No.	Pro-portion Rank		
Schoolboys	91	0.91	1	*	93	0.93	1	85* 0.85	1	
Youth club	18	0.75	2	23 0.96	1	20	0.83	4	15 0.63	2
Intermediate approved school	42	0.62	3	55 0.81	4	55	0.81	5	35 0.52	3
Junior approved school	12	0.43	5	22 0.79	5	24	0.86	2	9 0.32	4
Balderton B	37	0.46	4	69 0.86	2	64	0.90	6	24 0.30	5
Balderton A	6	0.28	7	14 0.67	6	18	0.86	2	5 0.23	6
Special hospitals	29	0.35	6	63 0.83	3	51	0.69	7	16 0.19	7

* Illegitimacy was not ascertained for the schoolboy group, so that column D does not contain this information. However when the original data sheets were used to combine information for parental deprivation and brain damage alone for the seven groups, the schoolboy group remained first in rank order.

TABLE III

	Predicted Rank	I Average Years Father Absent	Rank	II Average Years Mother Absent	Rank
Youth club	1	0.67	1	0.54	1
Intermediate approved school	2	1.95	2	0.75	2
Junior approved school	3	3.25	4	2.22	5
Balderton B	4	2.70	3	1.14	3
Balderton A	5	4.24	6	1.95	4
Special hospitals	6	3.52	5	3.08	6

tween the two periods. Neither appears to be the more important in relation to results.

The illegitimacy rate amongst the delinquents seems high, so the proportion of illegitimacy in all groups excluding the youth club was compared with the appropriate population illegitimacy rate. Forty-five (16 per cent.) of the 275 boys in the five delinquent groups are illegitimate. Taking the proportion legitimate in the total (relevant) population as 9 per cent. (i.e. high upper bound), a large sample proportions test still rejects the hypothesis that the proportion of delinquents who are illegitimate is the same as for the whole population, at a very high significance level ($p < 0.003$).

Verification of the youth club rankings is found in the data obtained from the 100 schoolboys who were a cross-section of all fourth-year boys in two State schools. Full data were obtained with respect to brain damage and parental deprivation from boys themselves and their school records, and showed that 91 per cent. (.93) had no history of brain damage. These proportions are less than shown by any of the other groups, including the youth club, but because data were not obtained for illegitimacy, and because many of the Grammar schoolboys were of higher social class than those in other groups, the results must be considered with caution. They are in keeping with the stated hypothesis.

COMMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis that among groups of delinquents and psychopaths severity of personality disorder is positively related to the frequency of

certain adverse environmental influence is supported.

It might be objected that as the groups are of different ages, particular social class, economic affluence, or separation due to the war might be relevant to the ranking, particularly of parental absence and illegitimacy. However, these influences would tend to place the youth club group lower in the list of predicted rank order, whilst increased war illegitimacy would tend to place the two approved schools groups higher, for, being born post-war they should have least parental separation and illegitimacy.

Social class has obvious associations with illegitimacy and parental desertion, and possible bias due to this must be assessed. Additional data for social class were available for the Special Hospital group, none of whom had parents in the Registrar-General classes 1 and 2; the Balderton groups with 10 parents in classes 1 and 2 (10 per cent.) and the youth club, 15 (63 per cent.) of whom had parents in class 3, and 9 (37 per cent.) in class 4. In the youth club group there were no parents in classes 1, 2 and 5. As Gittins, Stott and others have shown, Approved schoolboys very rarely have parents in social classes 1 and 2. Only the schoolboy group would appear to show a bias by way of social class.

Liability to brain damage presumably rises as age advances and is certainly highest among the oldest Special Hospital group. It is however, second highest in the youngest group, and there is no good reason for supposing there is differential admission here, except on the grounds of resultant disturbed behaviour.

It is important to note that, although this study suggests a relationship between severity

of disorder and frequency and degree of certain early adverse factors, in particular of parental separation, it does not mean that such influences are aetiological factors in the development of psychopathic personality. It is quite possible that actual maternal and paternal absences are minor factors in aetiology, it being the adverse parental attitudes and material circumstances contingent upon prolonged absences which exert the important effect on the developing child.

Our study used a very simple ranking of different groups, determined by fairly clear clinical considerations which few would dispute. The procedure is only justifiable as a pilot study, and further research is in progress in Wales to check the hypothesis in a different cultural area, and to assess the importance of other early adverse childhood influences, such as parental attitudes and under-privilege, in their contribution to clinically defined degrees of personality disturbance.

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