



Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves Their Characters and Home-Life

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The Problem: Methods of Research

It is not a very well known fact that for nine out of ten criminal cases the charge is theft. Furthermore, a large amount of convicted thieves are young people. For several years, half of the people convicted of theft have been under the age of 21 and over a sixth have been under 14. The 13 year old age group appears most frequently in court. Theft is seen as a "disease of childhood" and episodes later in life are mostly recurrences. The evidence suggests that for serious offenders, criminal-like behaviours were already apparent before puberty.

Research indicates that the child's emotional and social development is strongly influenced by their relationship with the mother. This study will focus on the mother-child relationship, considering the mother's conscious and unconscious attitude. In many cases, discussions with the mothers revealed strong feelings of dislike and rejection towards their children. It was also discovered that most of the children had spent a lot of time away from home. This study also looks at the occurrence of emotional traumas during the first decade of life.

The 44 children were given tests to assess their intelligence and their emotional attitude. The child and mother were then interviewed by a psychiatrist and all the information was then pooled together for diagnosis. In many cases, weekly assessment continued for several months.

The research presented here was very limited by a lack of resources; it was very unplanned, the number of cases are few, the data was collected quite unsystematically and several practical issues arose from working in a busy clinic. A proper investigation into this subject would cost a lot of money, however we argue that ultimately crime costs more. If 1% of the money spent on catching, trying and imprisoning criminals was spent on research into the source of criminal behaviour, so much money could be saved in the long term and, more importantly, many of the people condemned to years in prison could live happy lives.

Sample

The sample consisted of 44 children for whom stealing was a problem and who had been referred to a Child Guidance Clinic. Only a few of them had actually been charged in court due to their age; over half were under the age of 11. There were 31 boys and 13 girls in the group, which is unusual for criminal charges of young people which usually have a ratio of 10 boys to 1 girl. The Binet Scale was used to assess the children's intelligence. The average IQ for both groups was higher than the average for the population. Two of the children scored quite low on IQ, they both had a depressed and neurotic character. One child had a drunken and cruel mother whilst the other's mother experienced serious anxiety. It seemed that low intelligence was only a minor factor compared to others in causing criminal behaviours. There were relatively few cases of children from families who were dependant on support. Half of the cases were instances of chronic and serious thieving lasting very long periods (Grade 4). In ten cases, there had been persistent but irregular, mild thieving (Grade 3). In eight, there had been a few thefts only (Grade 2) and in four only one theft (Grade 1). 44 children from the same clinic who had not stolen were chosen for the control group. The controls were of a similar age, intelligence and economic status as the experimental group.

Character Types

Introduction

The children were categorised into six groups, described in Table 1. It should be noted that only 2 of the 44 thieves were diagnosed as normal, and that even these two possessed characteristics which showed instability. It was believed that without treatment, the other 42 would develop neurotic or psychotic symptoms later in life.

Table 1. Distribution of thieves by character type.

Character Type	Description	No.
A. 'Normal'	Children whose characters appear fairly normal and stable.	2
B. 'Depressed'	Children who have been unstable and are in a depressed state of mind.	9
C. 'Circular'	Unstable children who show alternating depression and over-activity.	2
D. 'Hyperthymic'	Children who demonstrate constant overactivity.	13
E. 'Affectionless'	Children who lack normal affection, shame or sense of responsibility.	14
F. 'Schizoid'	Children who show marked schizoid or schizophrenic symptoms.	4
Total		44

An example of a case from each group is provided below;

Group A. 'Normal Characters' - Case 1. Claud W.

Claude was referred to the clinic at the age of 16 after being charged with breaking open the gas meter in his home. When he was younger his mother used to punish him severely, keeping him in bed for several days at a time. She recently found that she was unable to assert herself over him and complained he was getting out of hand. When they argued, she would throw things at Claud. He began stealing from his mother at the age of 14. It was thought that he was of Normal Character reacting to difficult circumstances.

Group B. 'Depressed Character' - Case 9. Edward G. L.

Edward was referred to the clinic at the age of 14 after being charged with stealing food from his employer's shop. His father had been killed in a railway accident when he was 5 and his mother had died of consumption when he was 12. He started working at a grocer's shop at the age of 14 but was charged with stealing food during his first week. It was reported by his family that he had been a very happy child until his mother died. Since then he had become quiet and reserved and rarely expressed his feelings. In the psychiatric interview, he wept when asked about his mother. He claimed the theft was done as an act of bravado to impress his 12 year old nephew. Edward seems to have developed chronic depression since the death of his mother.

Group C. 'Circular Characters' - Case 12. Audrey H.

Audrey was referred to the clinic at the age of 12 by her schoolmistress for stealing. When she was 8 she witnessed the death of Peter, her younger brother, who was killed by a lorry whilst crossing

the road. Audrey's father blamed her for Peter's death because she had been with him at the time. Audrey did well academically and had won a scholarship to a secondary school. Until Peter's death, she had been happy and sociable. Since then however, she showed a noticeable lack of enthusiasm and was unable to make new friends. She began telling lies about being kidnapped and giving birth to a child. The stealing was first noticed around the age of 10, when she took money and other objects from children at school. She had an I.Q. of 159, but lacked interest for school work. Audrey displayed typically hysterical behaviour, which is better understood in terms of a depressive phase caused her brother's death which was followed by an elated phase, prominent in hysterical behaviour.

Group D. 'Hyperthymic¹ Characters' - Case 19. Ronald H.

Ronald was referred to the clinic at the age of 7 by his headmistress for stealing. The most striking thing about him was his strong desire to please. His birth was unplanned and his mother often neglected him during his early life to focus on her work and help his older, sickly brother. Ronald was very active, inquisitive and friendly but his mother described him as 'too affectionate'. He always had a craving for attention and affection which seemed to motivate his stealing. He appeared to buy popularity at school by giving away stolen sweets and money to other boys. When confronted about the stealing, he confessed and began to cry, saying he was uncertain why he did it. His boastful manner and exaggerated desire to please seemed typically hyperthymic. This personality had probably developed as a reaction to the neglect from his mother.

Group E. 'Affectionless Characters' - Case 37. Kenneth G.

Kenneth was 12 when referred to the Clinic for cruelty to younger children. It was found he had been stealing for several years and had just completed a year on probation for forging a cheque. Kenneth was conceived when his mother was 21 and his father left as soon as he discovered that she was pregnant. He was put into a foster home and then adopted by a loving, married couple. When he was 3, his mother remarried and brought Kenneth back to live with her again. He felt like he 'did not quite belong' with his mother, step-father and step-siblings. He did not show her any affection and was often disobedient. At the age of 7, when left in charge of one of his step-sisters, who was 3 at the time, he deliberately burned the child's leg. He frequently blamed his mother for removing him from his foster-home where he had been happy. He delighted in making his mother and step-siblings cry and would laugh when they did. He had been stealing since the age of 5, usually from his mother. When he was 11, he and three other boys forged a cheque which they cashed, using the money on cinema and boating. The boy's lack of normal affection was typical of the Affectionless Character.

Group F. 'Schizoid Characters' - Case 43. Alan E.

Alan was referred to the clinic at the age of 9 for stealing and soiling himself. Alan's parents lost their 6 year old son, William, when he was run over in the street. They decided that they would have another child to replace William and so Alan was born. Alan's mother was very over-protective of him, and became even more so after he was attacked by a dog at the age of 1. When he was 3, his mother, who suffered from manic-depressive psychosis, tried to strangle him. From the age of 3 onwards, he experienced poor bladder control. His mother was later admitted to a mental hospital and died two years later. His father remarried and had a daughter, of whom Alan was bitterly and openly jealous of. He often had violent outbursts and would break things. He was quarrelsome with other children and disliked groups. If accused of stealing, he would initially protest but would then confess without any sign of guilt. During the three months before coming to

¹ Hyperactive.

the clinic, he had soiled himself, rubbed his hands in his faeces and hidden it around the house. He frequently spoke to himself, as though there was someone in the room with him. He reported a strange feeling as if 'there was something in the room and then it's not there'. He began stealing after his father remarried. He would steal money and his step-mother's jewellery, which he would sell to buy toys, which he immediately picked apart to see what was inside. When asked about rubbing his hands with faeces, he said that the faeces had healing powers. Alan displayed several symptoms of psychosis. His history of hallucinations, together with him playing with faeces which was connected with ideas of magic, implied that he had schizophrenia.

Comparison With Controls

There was a stark difference between the types of character found in the criminal group and those found in the control group. There were no Affectionless Characters amongst the controls, this absence is statistically significant and demonstrates the strong association between Affectionless Character and stealing. Table 2 shows that the thieves in the Affectionless group would also steal more persistently and more seriously (Grade 4) than those in the other groups. It should also be noted that children of this character constitute over half of the Grade 4 offenders (13).

Table 2. Distribution of thieves by Character Type and Degree of Stealing.

Character Type	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Total
Normal'	0	2	0	0	2
Depressed'	1	4	3	1	9
Circular	0	0	2	0	2
Hyperthymic'	2	2	2	7	13
'Affectionless'	0	0	1	13	14
'Schizophrenic'	0	0	2	2	4
Total	3	8	10	23	44

The control group contained more depressed children as well as 8 children of a type not found among the thieves - Anxious Characters; well-behaved children who had developed a stammer or a phobia.

Causation

Genetic Factors

The incidence of mental illness in the parents and grandparents of the thieves is high and it is possible that genetic factors played a part in some cases. However, it should be noted that our data is limited in many respects. Firstly, evidence of the mental health of the parents is not comprehensive. Secondly, even if we had all the desired information, it would be impossible to separate inherited factors from the psychological influence of unstable parents. 4 of the thieves had psychotic parents and 2 others had psychotic grandparents. 11 patients had at least one neurotic or psychopathic patient. 3 had close relatives with epilepsy. Overall, only 22 of the thieves had parents or grandparents who were mentally healthy. This rate was the same for the patients in

the control group. This implies that heredity is an important factor in predisposing the development of delinquent and unstable personalities. However this evidence is only suggestive, as a parent who is mentally ill is likely to have a negative influence on the emotional environment in which the child is raised.

Early Home Environment

a) Broken Homes and Separation of Child From Mother

40% of the thieves had experienced prolonged separation from their mothers (defined as a separation of at least 6 months) compared with only 5% of the control subjects, a significant difference. 12 of the 14 Affectionless thieves had experienced a prolonged separation early in their lives. Whilst in the entirety of the other groups (30 children), only 5 had been separated from their mothers. There is a high degree of association between Affectionless Character and history of mother-child separation. It did not make a difference if the separation was from the child's biological mother or foster mother, it still had the same negative impact (as seen in the case of Kenneth G. when he was removed from his foster mother to be with his biological mother, whom he strongly resented).

After periods of prolonged separation, mothers have described reuniting with their children as 'like looking after someone else's baby', and described them as 'stranger' and 'the odd one out'. Such accounts are vivid evidence of the shattering affect these long separations have on the emotional bonds which usually unite mother and child. This may come as a shock to the mothers, many of whom find it difficult from then on to treat the child with normal affection.

Another important point is that, in most cases, there have been multiple accounts of interruption in the child's relationship with the mother-figure. Many of these children were in more than one foster home. It is also interesting to note that in practically all of these cases, the separation occurs after 12 months, suggesting the existence of a lower age limit, before which separations, whilst having undesirable effects, do not lead to the development of criminal behaviour.

b) Emotional Attitude of Parents

Whilst mother-child separation accounts for 17 of the 44 cases of stealing, it played no part in the remaining 27. However, in many of these 27 cases, the home environment was far from normal. Several children were unwanted, a few had fathers who hated them and many had anxious, unstable and nagging mothers. Unlike the incidence of separation, the incidence of these factors was the same amongst the thieves and the controls. Therefore, if these factors have a causal significance, it would be to predispose towards an unstable and neurotic character and not specifically criminal behaviour. Only 7 out of the 27 cases where there was no mother-child separation had mothers who were fairly normal. The proportion of unstable mothers is roughly the same for the thieves and the unstable controls. It is likely that the rate in a normal control group would be much lower.

If a child's mother is irritable, critical and nagging, the resulting frustration will produce anger and aggression in the children. This frustration will increase the child's desire for affection and tokens of affection but will also direct his aggression towards the mother. However, because the child also loves his mother, he will feel very anxious and guilty about having unkind impulses towards her. This will lead to a variety of pathological reactions, usually the formation of a rebellious and boastful character.

In 5 of the 27 cases without mother-child separation, the children's fathers were openly hostile towards them. Several of them never wanted the child and did not try to hide this fact from them. The impact of the father's attitude on the development of the child is demonstrated in another study by Healy and Bronner. Two twin boys are born to a married mother and father. When two months old, one of the babies didn't respond to the father for a time. Ever since then, the father hated that child saying 'I would rather have a snake around me than him' and never let the child touch him. This child grew up to be 'restless, impulsive, and uninhibited' whereas his twin grew up to be normal and sociable.

Traumatic Experiences During Later Childhood

There is reason to believe that the same influences can have a different affect depending on whether they take place during early or late childhood. In many of these cases, the instability of these children can be traced back to the first few years of life and any influences which come into play after the formation of their personality is completed will be regarded as being of secondary importance. There was only one case where unfavourable parental attitudes were of greater significance than the already criminal cast of the child's personality. This was Case 1, Claud, W. His stealing, which was directed entirely at his mother, appeared to be a direct reaction to her nagging attitude and demands for his weekly earnings. When away in a hostel he was much happier and settled down sociably.

There are other cases where it appears that the child would not have become a criminal, but for a relatively recent incident. In this study there are 11 cases in which a recent traumatic event precipitates stealing, varying from the death of a close relative to jealousy at the birth of a new baby. In most of these cases, the stealing was a part of a wider syndrome of depression, brought about by the traumatic event. The psychological process which leads a depressed child to steal is not clear however it does seem to involve a desire to make restitution to the dead person. (e.g. Audrey, who's younger brother, Peter, died in front of her, would steal things to give to her other brothers, but it seemed that this may have been an echo of her desire to help Peter).

Summary

In the majority of of children, more than one of the above factors was present. Overall the most common factors were genetics, separation from mother and having an ambivalent mother. These factors were present in 40-50% of the cases, however their incidence varied between Character Types, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Incidence of Causal Factors by Character Type

Character Type	No. of Cases	Genetic	Separation	Ambivalent Mother	Hatred from Father	Traumatic Event
Normal	2	1	0	2	0	0
Depressed and Circular	11	6	1	7	1	8
Hyperthymic	13	6	2	8	2	3
Affectionless	14	3	12	3	2	0
Schizophrenic	4	3	2	1	1	0
Total	44	19	17	21	6	11

We can see that the incidence of genetic factors is high for both Depressed (6 out of 11) and Hyperthymic (6 out of 13) thieves. The incidence of prolonged separation from the mother is significantly higher in the case of the Affectionless Characters (12 out of 14) than in any of the other groups. The instance of hostile and ambivalent mothers is significantly higher in both the Depressed (7 out of 11) and Hyperthymic groups (8 out of 13) than the others. The incidence of fathers who hate their children is relatively low in all groups. The incidence of recent traumas is significantly higher for the Depressed characters (8 out of 11) than the other groups. This differential incidence of causal factors by character type is striking, as is their differential incidence by degree of stealing. The less serious thieves (Grades 1 and 2) do not differ from the controls; the variations of incidence lie within the boundaries of chance for both groups. However, the incidence of ambivalent mothers and traumatic events is significantly *less* in the group of habitual thieves

than in the other groups. Prolonged separations are significantly more frequent in the case of habitual offenders than in the other groups.

Four of the five factors can therefore be ruled out as *specifically* causing criminal behaviour. On the other hand, the prolonged separation of the child from its mother or foster mother is highly characteristic of the persistent offender. The close relationship between child-mother separation, the Affectionless Character and persistent (Grade 4) stealing can be summarised like this:

- Of the 23 persistent (Grade 4) thieves, 13 (56%) were of Affectionless Character. Of the 14 cases of Affectionless Character, 13 (93%) were persistent thieves.
- Of the 14 cases of Affectionless Character, 12 (86%) had suffered prolonged separation from their mothers, or mother-substitutes, during their first five years. Conversely, of the 19 cases where such a separation had occurred, 12 (63%) were cases of Affectionless Character.
- Finally, 14 of the 23 persistent thieves (61%) had suffered prolonged separation, and of the 19 who had suffered a prolonged separation, 12 (74%) were persistent thieves.

It can be concluded that a large proportion of children who steal persistently are of Affectionless Character, a condition which has resulted from them having suffered prolonged separation from their mothers or foster-mothers during early childhood.

Psychopathology of the Affectionless Character

First, the role of emotional and aggressive impulses, both of which will have been exacerbated by the frustration of the early separation, should be noted. Through stealing, the child hopes for emotional satisfaction, though in reality it proves ineffective because the symbol of love has been mistaken for the real thing. From the earliest days, emotional satisfaction is associated with obtaining possession of things. In infancy it is milk, in later years toys and sweets, and even in adulthood a drink, a box of chocolates or a good meal symbolise kind feelings from one person to another. A child separated from its mother comes to crave both for her love and for its accompanying symbols. If this craving is unsatisfied then it later presents itself as stealing. The fact that most of these children stole food and that these thefts were often from their mothers was clearly no accident (there are several accounts of milk being stolen).

Important though emotional factors are in driving children to steal, the part played by aggression must not be forgotten. Revenge is undeniably a very powerful driving force towards stealing. Children who have suffered great deprivation themselves, will feel inclined to inflict equal suffering on someone else. Case 34, Derrick O'C., reluctantly admitted that much of his stealing had been done out of revenge. He felt jealous of his younger brother and felt that his presence had robbed him of his parents' affection and presents.

Whilst excessive emotional and aggressive impulses directed towards parents are not indicative of criminal behaviour and are often found in cases of mental illness, these cases are slightly different in that they lack the usual inhibition of these impulses and also that they are unable to form permanent personal relationships owing to the difficulty they have feeling and expressing love. It is theorised that this lack of inhibition is due to the absence of a functioning super-ego which is meant to coordinate selfish and altruistic desires. It is believed that the super-ego requires a stable love-relationship in early childhood to develop properly. These affectionate relationships are lacking in the case of the Affectionless thieves. They may be lacking due to lack of opportunity; it seems that there is a critical period between 6 and 12 months when infants require contact or they will be unable to form relationships when they are older. This inability has been observed with children in hospitals since it is unlikely that nurses will remain with them long enough for an attachment to form.

A second factor which may hinder the ability to form affectionate relationships is the child's own anger. This was apparent in cases where, at a later age, children were moved from their homes where they were happy and then expected to settle down with strangers. It is unsurprising that their reaction is often one of hatred for the new mother-figure which effectively inhibits any growth of love. It is likely that such emotions may also be aimed towards a mother who places her child in a hospital or foster-home. The child may be unaware of the reason for this event and may interpret it

as an act of hatred on the part of the mother. An example of this is Case 27, Betty, I. She completely ignored her mother when she visited her in her foster-home and continued to avoid her when she returned home. Love is impossible if hate is already established.

In the human mind, such a mood of hatred tends to perpetuate itself through fantasy. To hate a person is to conjure up a mental representation of them as bad and evil and bent on harm towards the perceiver. Fantasy, born of rage, thus distorts the picture of the real mother. The child then becomes haunted by bad 'objects', eventually seeing themselves as bad 'objects' and the child's picture of themselves becomes as distorted as their picture of their mother. They come to see themselves as undeserving of love and will interpret circumstances accordingly. One of the Affectionless thieves, Case 34, Derrick O'C., showed this tendency very strikingly. He was always anxious to please and worried whenever he was unable to answer a question. On one occasion, he arrived at the clinic so quietly he was not noticed and was in the waiting room for 45 minutes. He later said that he thought he was being kept waiting as a punishment for not answering all the questions. Such a misinterpretation demonstrates the child's belief that the analyst is a hostile person, but also that the patient is worthy of punishment.

The Affectionless thief seems to be dominated by these fantasies and the real situation is obliterated. This is the result of the prolonged separation they have suffered. Normally when such fantasies arise in children they are soon corrected to some degree by contact with the real mother who is never as bad as the one pictured by the child. The mere presence of the mother, irrespective of what she does, will go far to discredit the fantasy and will reassure the child as regards both her and themselves. But when a child does not see its mother for several months there is no opportunity for this correction and these fantasies become so entrenched that when the child returns to the real situation, it is viewed in no terms other than those of the fantasy. The result is a lack of trust and love for themselves and others. The presence of such fantasies explains the suspicion, secrecy and guilt which characterise these children. For instance Case 27, Betty I. and Case 34, Derrick O'C., never asked for anything, which suggests that they expected nothing and felt they deserved nothing. Several other cases saw children giving what they stole away for free, suggesting a feeling that they ought not to have anything.

There is a third factor which is probably instrumental in preventing the formation of loving relationships; the determination at all costs to avoid the disappointment, anger and sadness which results from wanting someone very much and not getting them. If we are indifferent towards others or dislike them then we disarm them of any power to hurt us. This indifference was characteristic of every single one of the 44 children, although in some cases it was only skin-deep. They neither showed affection nor appeared to care whether they got it. This may be the explanation of much of their apparent indifference. It is a policy of self-protection.

Conclusions and Summary

It can be concluded that, had it not been for certain factors inhibiting the development of the ability to form relationships, it is possible that these children would not have become offenders. These findings confirm the general psychoanalytic assumption that the early years are of great importance in character development. However, juvenile crime is not just a psychological problem, it is a social and economic problem as well. Poverty, bad housing, lack of recreational facilities and other socio-economic factors are very important and young criminal behaviour is the outcome of many, complex factors which should be studied *together* in order to ascertain the weight of each one.

Psycho-analytical treatment can often be slow and difficult, the main reason for this is that in most cases, the condition has been present in the child for several years and is therefore an established part of their psychology. Attempts should be made to diagnose and treat children at a much earlier age, when treatment is more influential. But even more vital than early diagnosis is prevention. Certain factors, such as deaths, cannot be prevented. Nevertheless, if all those who are involved in the upbringing and care of small children were aware of the appalling damage which prolonged separations have on the development of a child's character, a greater effort would be made to avoid them and many cases of criminal behaviour could be prevented.