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SOME ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING A THEORY OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

Walter B. Miller

It appears from the rather terse designation of my topic for discussion, which is simply "Theory," that I have virtually unlimited latitude as to how I should consume the time allotted to me. Since the primary concern of this conference is implementation, it would seem appropriate that a discussion of theory should be relegated rather politely to a fairly inobtrusive corner. Although under ordinary circumstances being assigned the general topic of "Theory" would be a source of great delight to any academician since it imposes virtually no limitations on what he is to talk about, nor does it tie him down to any level of concreteness, in this instance this pleasantly permissive topic poses a number of problems. A great deal of what I have to say about a theory of delinquency has already been said in the rather impressively packaged document entitled "Delinquent Behavior: Culture and the Individual"—a copy of which has been sent to each of you. The area of theory is covered in considerably more detail than I could possibly cover in the time allotted to me. I am thus faced with several alternatives, each of which is predicated on a different assumption as to the relationship between each of you and the document under consideration. I can assume that you have all read the document carefully and studiously, and therefore anything I might say that would duplicate the material in the document would be dull and repetitious, so in order not to bore you with a rehash, I would then proceed to present an entirely new and different set of theoretical ideas. Such a course of action, however, might entail certain disadvantages in that it might tend to weaken the reasonably consistent theoretical position of the document. As a second alternative I could assume that few or none of you have read the document, in which case my job would be to present a
succinct and comprehensive summary of its 150 pages in fifteen or twenty minutes. This alternative, I am afraid, would also be difficult, and, in fact, such condensation has already been done fairly well in some of the newspaper releases that have preceded this conference. A third alternative would be to briefly review a few of the major features of the document and quite deliberately omit others. I will attempt to do this by selecting and discussing briefly what I feel to be five of the major premises or assumptions underlying the theory presented here.

The first assumption has to do with the problem of defining juvenile delinquency. It frequently happens in conferences or discussion of a difficult or controversial area that someone will start out by saying, "Let's not get involved with the problem of definition; if we get mired down in this, we'll never be able to make any real progress." While this approach may be productive in considering some topics, it is absolutely self-defeating when it comes to a discussion of juvenile delinquency. Today, in the highly charged atmosphere of concern with youth crime, delinquency has come to mean all things to all men. To the teacher it is an aggravated form of misbehavior or willful disobedience; to the physician it is a form of sickness; to the psychiatrist it is a form of mental disorder; to the clergyman it is a sign of moral breakdown; to parents and many other adults it is a sad consequence of modern child-rearing practices. To some it is a symptom of a sick society, to others it is a product of sick individuals.

In light of this tremendous diversity of conception as to the nature of juvenile delinquency, it is essential that some reasonably explicit and limiting definition of just what we are talking about precede any discussion of cause and cures. On these grounds, an initial assumption of this document is that juvenile delinquency can be approached productively as a form of behavior—as a concrete set of actions which can be observed and described. The particular quality which
distinguishes delinquent behavior from the many other kinds of behavior is that delinquent behavior violates certain specific rules or laws or norms of designated institutional systems in our society. The central focus here, to quote the definition on page 54 of the document, is on such norm-violating behavior "which occurs with sufficient frequency and/or seriousness as to provide a firm basis for legal action against the acting individual or group."

It is evident that a form of behavior as intimately interwoven with the general social fabric as delinquency cannot simply be defined on a single dimension; rather it must be considered as a point of articulation of several types of institutional systems. If we think of the system of religious morality as one large circle; the system of secular norms and standards as another; the system of codified law and legal standards as a third, and the many complex rules and regulations of a variety of specific institutional systems such as the school, different church denominations, recreational institutions, and local administrations as an additional set of circles—delinquency arises at the point where these varied circles meet, overlap, and intermesh. A delinquent act is not an independent entity; it can only be defined by specifying which norm of which institutional system it violates.

A second major assumption of the document is that delinquent behavior so defined can be described objectively. A major advantage of starting out with the concept of delinquency as a form of observable behavior which can be described in objective terms is that it greatly facilitates the task of searching for causes. Many definitions—such as those which use the terms "anti-social" or "aggressive" or "acting out" or "deviant" as part of the basic definition contain definitional assumptions—often unrecognized as such—as to the causes of the phenomenon at hand. Using a descriptive definition which makes no assumption as to the ultimate cause or causes of delinquency enables us to separate clearly the question exactly
what kind of behavior are we talking about?" from the question "What are the causes of this type of behavior?".

A third assumption of this document has to do with the tremendously complex and controversial area of the causes of juvenile delinquency, as here defined. It is difficult not to be banal in citing the assumption which must be made here; the statement "The etiology of delinquency is not unitary but must be conceived as the result of an interrelated complex of causes" has been made so often during the past ten or fifteen years that a simple repetition fails to dent our consciousness. It goes without saying that delinquency cannot be ascribed to any of the unitary causes cited in the document—such as working mothers, lack of recreational facilities, or weak paternal discipline—but I think it is still necessary to amplify the notion of multiple causality by saying that it is similarly impossible productively to conceptualize delinquent behavior within any single disciplinary frame of reference currently available to us. But this does not imply simply that we list the basic postulates as to delinquency cause forwarded by the various disciplines, place them in conjunction with one another, and say "All of these factors must be taken into consideration"—this is avoiding the issue. At the present time the three most promising frames of reference for conceptualizing juvenile delinquency are the biological or physiological, the psychological or psychiatric, and the social or cultural. It is rather unfortunate that a reasonably airtight case for the causation of delinquency can be made almost entirely within the confines of each of these three approaches. The fact that each of these systems—physiological, psychodynamic, and socio-cultural—can produce a reasonably self-contained theory of delinquency cause—each in its own terms—faces us directly with the problem of understanding why this is possible.

There are fads and fashions as to which type of explanatory system is most popular among different groups at different times. I would say that at the present
time the system of explanation based on psychological and psychiatric concepts is running an easy first, that the system involving social and cultural ideas is well behind but coming up fast, and that the system of ideas revolving primarily around biological factors is at present running a fairly poor last place—at least in most non-medical circles. As I see the situation—and this reflects the general position taken in the document—the problem involves the matter of increasing specificity as one moves from generalized, broad gauge explanations toward the explanation of a particular delinquent act committed by a particular individual. In this process, the first most relevant level of explanation is the social or cultural. The question must always be asked "What is the specific cultural or subcultural milieu in which this particular act is occurring?" "To what extent does this act violate the effective norms of the individual's immediate reference groups, and to what extent does it conform to these norms?" Answering this question requires a much more refined breakdown of the extensive set of subcultural groups in our society than is currently available. The second level of explanation involves individual difference or psychological factors. "Within any given cultural milieu what are the specific personality characteristics or family relationship factors which determine why one individual in a given cultural milieu will adopt a pattern of delinquent behavior and another will not?" On this level an extremely wide variety of factors are involved. Are there certain kinds of family units or child-rearing practices within any subcultural system which are more closely associated with a pattern of delinquent behavior than other kinds? Are there any particular personality types related to basic psychological or physiological factors which differentiate individuals in this milieu? And finally, on the physiological or biological level, can we point to any demonstrable relation between specific physiological attributes or physical defects and engaging in delinquent behavior? It is necessary to stress once more that these levels cannot
be considered as conceptually separate, but that an adequate explanation of delinquent behavior must rest on the mutual and simultaneous articulation of the range of factors delineated within at least these three levels of explanation. This may sound complicated, abstract, and abstruse, but unfortunately, juvenile delinquency itself is a complicated, abstruse, and complexly patterned phenomenon.

Our third major assumption, therefore, is that any sophisticated consideration of the causes of delinquent behavior must rest on the simultaneous consideration of the acting individual as a product of a specific and explicitly denoted cultural milieu, as a particular type of personality whose motivations reflect the individual circumstances of his upbringing, and as a biological organism with certain inherent organic potentialities and capacities. Each delinquent act must be screened through at least these three frames of reference, and the relative weighting of each set of factors determined as accurately as possible. For example, the act of throwing a stone through a plate glass window cannot be explained merely on the grounds that individuals have aggressive drives as part of their biological endowment, since such drives are most frequently expressed in very different forms. Nor can the act be explained simply on the grounds that the individual's early family experiences produced an unusually high potential for aggressive behavior. This would in no way explain why window-breaking is selected as the avenue for expressing this potential. Nor can the act be explained on the grounds that the individual lives in a culture where both stones and plate glass windows exist in reasonably close conjunction, since many individuals do not take advantage of this particular conjunction to produce the result under consideration.

A fourth major assumption of the theoretical document is that the level of explanation or complex of causative factors commonly designated as "cultural" must be given far greater primacy in considering the causes of delinquency than
has heretofore been customary. A whole range of factors which are in fact intimately involved in the causation of delinquency appear either peripheral or insignificant unless viewed from this perspective. Current cultural phenomena such as the disc jockey, the lyrics of Rock and Roll songs, the prevalence of jive talk, the multiplicity of TV westerns, appear, from this vantage point, not as relatively bizarre or extrinsic phenomena, but rather as integral parts of a total cause and effect linkage of which one product is delinquent behavior. A further consequence of adopting this approach is that all of us, and that includes all of us here, become an integral part of the total set of cultural forces which contribute to juvenile delinquency. It makes us all actors personally involved in the drama rather than bystanders who may watch the unfolding spectacle with alarm, shock, and dismay, but feel essentially disassociated from the strange actions of those on the stage.

A further implication of our fourth assumption is that inutilizing the cultural frame of reference to understand juvenile delinquency in this country, we come at once up against the reality and cogency of social class differences in the United States. We must constantly bear in mind that any system of explanation which places consistent and systematic stress on social class factors is tremendously uncongenial to the majority of Americans. We all recognize on one level the reality and cogency of social class differences, but because of deep-rooted American ideals centering around equality of opportunity, the dignity and worth of the individual, and the ultimate disappearance of class differences, many feel that it is not only uncalled for but even reprehensible to direct and continue to direct focused attention to this area. We would prefer almost any set of explanations to those which lean heavily on social class factors. Virtually every serious research project on juvenile delinquency reported during the past thirty or forty years has somewhere implied the intimate relation between lower
class status and juvenile delinquency. However, this report, as far as I know, is the first to develop in unequivocal terms the thesis that the bulk of delinquent behavior which becomes the concern of official agencies is predominantly a problem of the lower class community. It might even be argued that the preponderant emphasis during the past fifteen or twenty years on psychological factors as effective causes of delinquency has functioned in part as a device to shield us from the necessity of facing this fact.

If we consider the lower class youngster who persistently violates legal norms as a sick or deviant individual who cannot conform to community standards, we can then consider him as a relatively isolated case who can or should be removed from that community and subjected to individual treatment. This formulation protects us from the necessity of looking at the way of life of that community itself and asking why delinquent behavior is a recurring and persistent part of that life. If we consider the youngster not as a disturbed or deviant exception to an otherwise law-abiding community climate, but see him rather as acting primarily in conformity to the bases of status and prestige explicitly or implicitly recognized within that community, we are faced with an immeasurably harder task. This entails not the relatively simple job of isolating the individual from his community milieu, but rather regarding that milieu itself, with its existing values, as a potential target of change efforts.

The fifth assumption underlying the document has to do with considerations of truth, validity, and the difficulties inherent in deriving accurate and reliable conclusions in this area. Criminal behavior as a general phenomenon carries an immense emotional charge. None of us can regard crimes such as murder, incest, or violent theft with any degree of objectivity or detachment. The field of juvenile delinquency in particular stirs deep and intense passions since this phenomenon touches off fears as to the future welfare of our civilization.
as this future is augured in the present-day behavior of our youth. Any area which is highly charged emotionally produces certain inevitable consequences. First, such an area tends to spawn a host of simple and unitary explanations which are adhered to with great vigor and tenacity, not because of their explanatory efficiency but because they buttress the psychological security of those who are emotionally threatened. In addition to providing easily understandable explanations, the unitary explanation frequently calls for a relatively simple or direct solution such as banning the publication of comic books or forbidding mothers to work. A second consequence is that such emotionally charged areas tend to generate well-developed mythologies whose primary theses derive not from objective fact-finding techniques, but rather from deep emotional responses to the involved phenomenon and the resultant coloration of perception. It is unfortunate, but, I feel, presently inevitable, that many professional workers in the field of delinquency are far more influenced by such considerations than is compatible with sound scientific method.

A characteristic of mythology is its relatively tenuous quality. It becomes difficult to pin down exactly what is being said and on what grounds statements are based. It should be clear that the form of this document was significantly influenced by the effort to combat some of the prevailing mythologies relating to delinquency, and in so doing it forwards many direct and unequivocal statements. In this fact, I feel, lies both the strength and weakness of this presentation. The direct and here unqualified nature of many of the statements makes them vulnerable to direct challenge. This was deliberate policy. If it is quite clear what we are saying, then the path to proof or disproof is that much easier. The particular position taken by this document is presented in as direct and consistent a form as was possible. Some of its major premises have not as yet been carefully documented, and it is highly
likely, and, in fact, desirable that future research will impel modifications in some of these premises. Presenting conclusions in a form which permits their validity to be tested is the basis of all scientific advance. However, in the present state of our knowledge as to juvenile delinquency, we feel that this general exposition as to its nature and causes represents as sound a formulation as is currently available. We believe that in the conscientious and systematic testing of its basic assumptions and conclusions through ongoing action programs lies great promise for a workable and viable solution to this most vexing social problem.