

CONDITIONING IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT OF DELINQUENTS AND CRIMINALS

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In this presentation, conditioning in the development and treatment of criminals and delinquents will be discussed through a fictional character, Bigger Thomas. Bigger was the Negro boy, who in Richard Wright's (1940) famous book, "Native Son" committed two socially "intolerable" crimes. His first was accidentally smothering a well-intentioned white girl to death and then burning her in a furnace. His second was battering his Negro girl-friend to death with a brick in an abandoned building, to silence her and save himself.

Diagnostic Considerations

Psychiatry has, for more than a hundred years, participated in the administration of criminal law by testifying in courts on the presence or absence of insanity in cases of criminal violence. If expert opinion established the presence of insanity, medical therapy was substituted for legal punishment. But in Bigger's case it would have been possible to pursue the defense on the grounds of insanity, since he definitely did not commit his crimes under the influence of defective reasoning due to a "disorder of the mind." He committed both of his murders in a state of clear consciousness, in spite of the fact that in the accidental choking of Mary Dalton he acted upon the fear he was conditioned to throughout his life. As soon as he discovered that the girl was dead he was immediately fully aware of the consequences of his deed. Not only did he know the nature and quality of his action, but he also knew that what he had done was wrong.

Since Bigger was neither mentally retarded nor psychotic, the question arose as to whether his criminal actions could be explained on the basis of a neurosis coming into the forefront. This question became important after the publication of Alexander and Staub's (1929) essay, "The Criminal, the Judge and the Public," in which the psychoanalytic view was expressed that the majority of criminals who are not psychotic are suffering from a neurosis. This conception, which attributed criminal behavior to genetic and neurotic factors or to early childhood influences over which the individual has no adequate control in later life, was challenged recently by Jenkins (1942) and Szasz (1963). And since neurosis and inner conflict are associated with a high level of inhibition, sense of duty, introjected standards, and superego control, exactly the opposite characteristics which Bigger Thomas had, nowhere in "Native Son" is there any indication that he may have been neurotic.

An alternative diagnostic possibility that remained was psychopathy. While in the original view of Pritchard (1835) and Kraepelin (1896) the existence of antisocial behavior sufficed to place any

individual in one or the other group of pathological personalities, in the elaborations of Legrain (1906) and more recently, of Kurt Schneider (1958), only those behavior disorders were accepted as psychopathic which were found to be secondary to a personality anomaly.

Psychophysiological experimentation brought further clarification of the concept of psychopathy and also contributed to the establishment of possible connections between criminal behavior and pathological personality. Particularly rewarding were the findings of conditional reflex studies.

The conditional reflex is both a behavioral and a neurophysiological phenomenon. In contrast to unconditional reflexes which are inborn congenital stimulus-response patterns, conditional reflexes are acquired and are continually being formed. This conditional reflex formation was described in Pavlov's (1928) classical experiments as the result of associated administrations of conditional and unconditional stimuli. Somewhat later Konorski and Miller (1937) recognized the importance of a third, motivational factor, in the elaboration of conditional reflexes for behavioral activities which are under voluntary control. They developed the conception of the instrumental conditioning model as opposed to the classical conditioning model. In both models a formerly indifferent stimulus acquires the ability to elicit a response which was previously only elicited by a specific stimulation. But while in the classical model the associated administration of the stimuli is sufficient to develop and maintain the new stimulus-response constellation, in the instrumental model the new stimulus-response constellation can only be developed and maintained if the response is adequately motivated, i.e., by receiving a reward or avoiding punishment if the expected or correct conditional response is made.

The conditionability of psychopaths and criminals was extensively studied by Eysenck (1964) and his collaborators. At first, Franks (1955, 1961) reported that psychopaths are extroverted and poor conditioners. Then a remarkably high percentage of criminals was found to be extroverted and poor conditioners also. On that basis it was assumed that criminals are pathological personalities. This was supported by evidence showing that alcohol, which is a depressant substance, reduces conditional reflex formation, increases extroversion and precipitates, not infrequently, criminal behavior. While the relationship between extroversion and reduced conditionability of psychopaths and criminals was challenged by Robin (1957), the lowered conditionability of psychopaths and criminals was confirmed by Quay (1965). He saw in psychopathy a pathological quest for stimulation and interpreted the reduced conditionability of psychopaths as the inability of the unconditional stimulus

to induce a sufficiently strong excitatory process which is the prerequisite for conditional reflex formation. Quay's hypothesis was supported by Schachter and Latane (1963) who found that the conditionability of a group of sociopaths (in avoidance learning) improved under the stimulant adrenalin while the conditionability of the controls decreased under administration of the same substance.

Returning to Bigger, he was not described as extroverted nor was he characterized generally as a poor conditioner. He was a psychopath neither in the new nor in the old sense. His deeds which upset society were not secondary to an abnormal personality but rather his unusual personality (unusual inasmuch as it deviated from that of an average Negro boy) as manifested in his crimes was secondary to a negative attitude towards society. But to which group of criminals did Bigger Thomas belong? He was aware not only of his actions but also of his emotional reactions. None of the psychopathologies described suited his case.

Franks and Willett (1956) expressed the view that criminal behavior might be resolved, on the basis of conditioning, into two broad subcategories. In the first subcategory, they grouped the asocial low conditioners who are unable to learn from experience and who are commonly classified as psychopathic by Eysenck's school. In the other subcategory they grouped the antisocial criminals who are not poor conditioners but whose conditioned patterns, the ones they acquired from their environment, are undesirable in general and delinquent or criminal in particular. This socially conditioned behavior suits the case of Bigger Thomas. "What Bigger did, was but a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life. He was living only as he knew how and as we have forced him to live" (Wright, 1940).

As there were no adequate extenuating circumstances, Bigger Thomas was sentenced to death and executed.

Therapeutic Considerations

The modern "therapeutic" concepts in penology are based on the contributions of Liszt (1889), an outstanding German criminologist. Liszt's essential contributions of shifting the emphasis from the deed to the doer, of sentencing the criminal and not only his crime, opened the door to a number of new therapeutic approaches. Of these, the psychodynamic and the behavioral approaches, based on psychoanalytical and conditioning principles respectively, were the most extensively accepted.

The psychoanalytically-oriented criminal psychiatrist distinguished between two types of criminals: the neurotic and the normal. Since the majority of criminals and delinquents were considered to be sick, i.e., neurotic, the representatives of this school suggested psychiatric help - psychoanalytically-oriented reeducation through group or individual psychotherapeutic techniques and rehabilita-

tion instead of punishment. On the other hand, traditional retaliative penology remained acceptable for the non-neurotic criminals to which Bigger Thomas belonged.

The behaviorally-oriented criminal psychiatrist distinguished between two types of criminals: the psychopathic and the normal. The psychopathic criminal, whose asocial activity is secondary to a personality anomaly, is extroverted and a poor conditioner. Because of these characteristics it was assumed that society failed to inculcate into him its taboos (usually labeled as moral-ethical feelings) concerning other individuals and/or the entire society. These asocial criminals are not responsive to psychic education, psychotherapy, group therapy, training, or treatment (behavior therapy). According to Eysenck (1964), the only possible way of successfully treating these cases is to increase their conditionability by the appropriate drugs simultaneously with educational training and treatment processes. Of the available compounds, the group of the amphetamines (dextroamphetamine, etc.), the piperidyls (methylphenidate, etc.), and the different trimethylxanthine preparations (caffeine citrate, etc.) are particularly effective in this respect. As Pavlov's inhibitory process (particularly differential and retarded inhibition) plays a prominent role in the development of moral, ethical, and social emotions (Nyiro (1958) an alternative treatment for these asocial delinquents is to facilitate the activity of their inhibitory processes. Whether this can be best achieved by purely behavioral methods, by drugs, or by a combination of both, remains to be answered.

In contrast to the psychopathic, extroverted, asocial criminals, there are the antisocial introverted delinquents with normal conditionability. Retarded inhibition functions physiologically in these cases, but the "moral" and "ethical" feelings that these persons develop in their particular environment are undesirable. These delinquents belong to two subgroups. Members of the first subgroup are criminals for whom crime becomes a skill or occupation so long as it remains rewarding. Differential reinforcement of punishment and withholding of reward for behavior that is inappropriate or incorrect is the treatment of choice in these cases, and apparently has been employed successfully (Burchard and Tyler, 1965).

While in the first subgroup of antisocial delinquents the particular criminal action is the result of a particular environmental situation, in the second subgroup of antisocial delinquents the generally undesirable environmental situation may lead to criminal action. While in the first subgroup of antisocial delinquents all the other personality manifestations, except the criminal conduct, conform to the accented social norms, in the second group neither the criminal conduct nor other personality manifestations conform. Consequently, while in the first subgroup the criminal conduct is socially motivated, in the second subgroup it is socially conditioned without an apparent or hidden motivation. In this socially conditioned group falls Bigger

Thomas, who "every time when he comes in contact with us kills" because of a "physiological and psychological reaction (conditional reflex) embedded in his being," in whom "the hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence" (Wright, 1940).

The absence of manifest psychopathology or detectable motivation - in this author's view - makes psychiatric intervention inappropriate in Bigger Thomas' case. Accepting this and exploring some of the social implications of conditioning may eventually lead to new methods of prevention and possibly therapy.

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HISTORICAL NOTE ON

Emile Kraepelin (1856-1926) German

Probably the most influential psychiatrist in Germany. Published a textbook of psychiatry which went through many editions and was widely translated or imitated. (First edition: "Psychiatrie, a Textbook for Students and Physicians," 1883). Known for two very important contributions, his descriptions of the behavior and course of psychotic patients, and his classification scheme. He was the first to bring together catatonia, hebephrenia and paranoia into one category which he called "dementia praecox," later changed by Bleuler to "schizophrenia." This classification scheme was widely adopted, and the current official nomenclature of the American Psychiatric Association is directly derived from it, through three separate modifications. He was also influential in keeping alive the theory of the organic cause of psychiatric conditions, and his statement that every type of psychosis can be shown to have specific brain lesions went unchallenged until the 1920s. His type of psychiatric study or teaching is sometimes referred to as "descriptive psychiatry."

- sketch by Charles E. Goshen, M.D.

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