The Criminal Mind: A New Look at an Ancient Puzzle

Modern attempts to come up with an elucidation of the "criminal personality" date back to the work of Caesare Lombroso, the 19th-century Italian criminologist who postulated that criminals were atavistic throwbacks. Politically liberal academics nowadays reject any such attempts out of hand, so strong is the fear that social Darwinism might again rear its ugly head.

But considerable interest has been stirred in the past year by the report of a 14-year project recently completed at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C., the federal psychiatric hospital where "criminally insane" people are housed. Initiated by Samuel Yochelson, a psychiatrist who died last summer, and joined 7 years ago by psychologist Stanton Samenow, the study has culminated in a three-volume work entitled *The Criminal Personality*.

In essence, the study makes the case that hard-core criminals are fundamentally different from other people. But it also shows that in some cases even the worst can be taught to change their ways.

The first book is an extremely detailed description of characteristic behavior and thought patterns of chronic, violence-prone, apparently intractable felons. The second book describes a treatment approach the authors, after years of trial and error, believe is effective in changing the life-styles of criminals generally regarded as untreatable. The third volume (not yet available) deals with the special problems of drug-abusing criminals.

It would not be quite accurate to say that the findings of the study are controversial—many academics consider it beneath their notice altogether because it lacks scientific rigor. The major substantive criticism is that the study makes no attempts to determine causes of crime—even though that was not the authors' intent. But considering the wide divergence of opinion over the study, the basis for hostility toward the project appears to be more ideological than scholarly. An academic psychiatrist, who refused to be quoted, called it "baloney" and said that it was reprehensible because it appeals to those who like to think that "criminals are morally bad people." (Which indeed the subjects of the study were if judged by prevailing social standards.) On the other hand, corrections officials have welcomed it with open arms. "Probably one of the most important studies that's been published in this area in many many years," says psychologist George Horvat at Terminal Island state penitentiary in Los Angeles. "The general feeling here is that we could have written the book [volume 1]. It fits our population almost to a tee," says another psychologist, Steven Douglas Walker of Atascadero State Hospital, California's repository for the criminally insane.

Other experts, such as Saleem Shah of the National Institute of Mental Health's crime and delinquency section, say volume 1, although unusually detailed, contains no new information. Yet many of its assumptions fly in the face of popular concepts about criminals and their motivations.

The authors assert, for example, on the basis of their observations of 255 habitual felons, that bad social and environmental conditions are not the chief cause of criminal behavior; perpetrators of violent crimes or sexual offenses are no different from other offenders because all have done, or at least thought of doing, just about anything in the course of their careers; crimes that appear impulsive or out of the perpetrators' control only appear so, and are actually the logical outcome of thought processes; and hard-core criminals are not simply following the norms prescribed by dismal backgrounds but have chosen to engage in antisocial behavior from early childhood.

Yochelson, a psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist who had been in private practice in Buffalo before coming to St. Elizabeths in 1961, originally tried to use conventional techniques in the treatment of criminals who had been committed to the hospital as not guilty by reason of insanity (NGBRI). But after several years of frustration and failure Yochelson concluded that "after psychotherapy, we have produced criminals with insight, but criminals nonetheless." So he abandoned the search for causes and, in fact, threw the entire medical model out the window.

First of all, it was found that none of the NGBRI men (the study deals exclusively with men) were in fact psychotic, although many had diagnoses of "chronic undifferentiated schizophrenia," and as the study was extended to men outside St. Elizabeths, says Samenow, no difference was found between the "insane" ones and the others when it came to "the basic structure of their thinking and their characters." Psychiatrically speaking, the men were, by definition, suffering from severe character disorders which put them all in the category of "sociopath" or "psychopath"—a category that is notoriously intractable to any accepted forms of therapy. Whether or not such individuals are mentally ill is a matter of furious debate—certainly, common sense says that anyone who goes around raping and murdering is "sick"—but the authors dismiss this concept on the simple basis that diagnoses only hindered their attempts to understand their subjects and were useless in formulating a successful treatment strategy. Organic causes are also dismissed—one of the 255 had petit mal epilepsy, but this was not thought to be related to his violent behavior.

The reader is left to figure out what went into the making of the extraordinary composite personality described, in relentless detail, in volume 1. The reporting is strictly phenomenological, with no attempt to identify or explain individual pathologies. The emphasis is on what all the authors' subjects had in common. With information supplied by relatives and others who had associations with the subjects, the criminal lifestyle and attitudes toward the world are detailed from childhood on.

The "criminal child," as the authors, bluntly call him, commences his antisocial behavior very early, often rejecting parental love as a mere toddler. He is a truant from school, extremely active and energetic. Violation is his way of life; normal life is "boring." Wherever he goes he finds like-minded companions—"birds of a feather find each other very quickly," says Samenow. He has no normal relationships—all are exploitative, based on power, sexual dominance, or mutual criminal activity. He is basically a solo operator who needs to consider himself superior to everyone else.

Although some of the subjects had specialties such as child-molesting or armed robbery, all had engaged in a wide range of antisocial activities. Criminals are loaded with anger, say the authors,

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and ruled by fear—fear of being "put down" by others, of weakness, of bodily injury, and of getting caught. They are excessively concerned with health and body image. They are extremely pretentious and unable to tolerate any criticism. Lying is congenital and comes as naturally as breathing. Offsetting their ruthlessness are erratic shows of sentimentality. The criminal insists on thinking he's a "good person" and does not consider himself to have done anything bad. "Right" is "what's right for him at the time." And on and on. The picture that emerges from volume 1 is of a group who are incredibly active, hypocritical, walking a tightrope on the edge of reality, conning, lying, manipulative, amazingly resourceful, evasive, secretive, alert, unpredictable, and virtually devoid of any redeeming human qualities. Criminals are a bundle of paradoxes—"I can change from tears to ice in a minute," boasts one. The authors contend that the apparent contradictions arise from attempts by normal ("responsible") people to understand criminals according to their own value systems.

So, they say, the only way to understand criminals is to abandon pre-

Briefing

Support Growing for a Department of Education

The big push is now on for the creation of a separate Department of Education, called for by Jimmy Carter in his campaign and explicitly mentioned in his State of the Union address on 19 January.

Federal expenditures in education have tripled since the mid-1960's, and the time appears riper than it ever was for the establishment of an education department. Carter is the first president to actively promote the idea. A bill introduced by Senator Abraham Ribicoff (D–Conn.) has 57 cosponsors and there are reportedly 100 House members solidly behind the idea.

It is not yet clear what specifically the President wants, although it has been reported that he favors a broad new Department of Education and Human Development, which would entail massive transfers of programs—including manpower training and juvenile justice—from all over the government.

The Department of Education outlined in the Ribicoff bill would be somewhat less extensive, but among the programs it would take over are HEW's Office of Civil Rights, its Head Start program, the Agriculture Department's child nutrition programs, the HUD college housing loan program, the schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the educational directorate of NSF, and the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities. (The NFAH would be guaranteed a degree of autonomy, but "the artists are raising hell," says a Senate staffer.)

The proposed changes are obviously going to be stirring up an awesome array of political battles. The Administration is divided—HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., has said he'll go along with anything the President wants, but he's also made no secret of the fact that he wants education to stay where it is. He thinks it needs to be linked with health and welfare and that there are too many people reporting directly to the President already.

In the education community, organizations representing higher education have not gotten terribly worked up over the proposed change, although they tend to be supportive. The two big teachers' unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), oppose each other on the issue. The NEA supports the Ribicoff bill and believes education will get better funding if it is uncoupled from the standard uncontrollable budget items that make up 70 percent of the HEW budget. Besides, says an NEA spokesman, "We're the only major country in the Western world that doesn't have a ministry of education." The AFT is said to oppose the new department because the NEA is for it, but an AFT spokesman said it was feared a secretary of education would not have much status and that a separate department would be a "moving target" for budget cutters.

More on the Administration stand is expected to be revealed shortly in a special presidential message to Congress on education.

HEW Soon to Ban Use of Prisoners in Research

The time seems to be at hand where virtually all biomedical and behavioral research on prisoners in this country—except that designed for the well-being of the subject—will come to an end.

The practice has declined dramatically over the past decade, particularly since the Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research swung into action in 1974.

In 1976 the Bureau of Prisons declared a prohibition on research in federal prisons. And on 5 January the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued regulations based on commission recommendations. The proposed rules prohibit HEW from supporting such research "if the research did not represent minimal risk research on incarceration or on penal institutions, and was not intended to improve the health of individual prisoners."

HEW secretary Joseph Califano has also directed the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to develop regulations that would extend the principle to new drug testing done by pharmaceutical companies.

The policy has been so long in the works that it seems unlikely to affect the operations of the drug companies who have conducted the bulk of prison research. The commission found that prison research was only conducted in seven states anyway; more recently, an FDA spokesman told *Science* that drug companies were conducting prison research in only three locations around the country.

Although institutionalized populations are desirable for phase I drug testing (clinical dose-ranging studies with healthy humans) a spokesman for the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Association says drug companies have by and large found other satisfactory subjects among their employees, medical students, and college students. He also says some companies are finding great pools of willing volunteers among students in Europe.

The prime reason for cessation of prison testing is the belief, now very widely held, that true "informed consent" is impossible to obtain in a prison setting. The only real opposition to the new policy has come from prisoners themselves. Many resent the loss of a potential income source as well as the chance to do something worthwhile.

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conceptions and try to get into their minds. After thousands and thousands of hours of interviewing and therapy, the authors claim to have gotten beyond the facade of conning and manipulation and to have arrived at a categorization of 52 "thinking errors" to which criminals are prone.

A fundamental error is a distorted sense of time. Although they may have grandiose ideas about the future, they live entirely in the present. Making this possible is their capacity for emotional "fragmentation" (other observers have called it emotional lability)—the tears-to-ice syndrome that permits them to have the feelings appropriate to their immediate needs. For example, when out to commit a crime they are able to "cut off" their fears of being caught and move into a mode of "superoptimism" so they can carry out their designs. Related to this is the tendency of criminals to confine themselves to "concrete thinking"—cutting off abstract concepts, including insight into themselves and the ability to empathize with anyone else. In other words, criminals have tunnel vision—one described his consciousness as being like a flashlight in a dark room.

The overwhelming impression from this book is that criminals really are not like you and me. Through the criminal's mind continually stream thoughts of violation. Merely walking into a store, for example, will trigger estimates of money in the till, vulnerability of the merchandise, ideas about violating the women present, and so forth. Only a small fraction of the crimes thought of are actually carried out, and the criminal is apprehended for only a tiny fraction of those. According to one estimate, only 50 percent of serious crimes are reported to the police; 12 percent lead to arrest; 6 percent lead to criminal convictions; and 1.5 percent result in incarceration. But the accounts of the men in the St. Elizabeths study would seem to indicate that for the repetitive "career criminal" these percentages are even lower.

Having delivered themselves of this dreadful portrait of the chronic serious offender, Yochelson and Samenow go on in volume 2 to describe their treatment program. The first interview with the candidate was not the warm, empathic, head-nodding session favored by some. Instead, the therapists attempted to break through the con games (many criminals with previous brushes with psychiatry are very adept at spouting what is expected, replete with psychiatric jargon) by confronting the criminals with who they were. They were told of their wayward childhoods, their lying, and their general life-styles as well as regaled with their assumptions about themselves and others. According to the authors, the subjects were often reduced to speechlessness or bewilderment by the accuracy of the accusations. The men were then informed they had three choices: continuing the status quo, suicide, or change.

Dr. Samuel Yochelson, left, and Dr. Stanton Samenow

Samenow emphasizes that you have to catch them at a low point in their erratic cycles, when the life of crime has become untenable but has been continued because they do not know any other way to live. Those who opted to join the Yochelson program were "at a point where everything in life is hell," says Samenow. These people—only 30 stuck out 500 or more hours of therapy—were then treated to a vision of what is called a "responsible" life. They were told that at the beginning they could not drink or have sex with anyone except their wives, and were given other strictures that add up to what Samenow acknowledged is a "very gray" existence. The way the program evolved, the criminals were required to attend 3-hour group-therapy sessions every day for at least a year. (The population included the St. Elizabeths patients and, increasingly, convicted felons required to attend as a condition of probation.) Samenow and Yochelson came to the conclusion that being a criminal is very much like being an alcoholic—touch a drop and you're on the way back to the gutter. They required that the subjects keep detailed diaries ("moral inventories") of all their thoughts. Seemingly harmless impulses—like getting drunk or buying a car one could not afford ("nonarrestable" activities, in the authors' terminology)—then came to light and were nipped in the bud before they led to crime.

The therapy does not pay much attention to feelings and emotions, Yochelson having determined that feelings are used to manipulate. Instead of affirming the subjects' good qualities, the effort is to show them how "rotten" they are; that their good qualities are about as useful as having 20-20 vision when you are dying of cancer (a favorite simile of Samenow's). The therapy is didactic, heavily concentrated on examination of thought processes, and unapologetically moralistic. It has elements in common with the Synanon approach for drug abusers: the attempt is to break down the entire personality, and the assumption is that appropriate changes in feeling will follow behavior changes. Probably the most unusual aspect is the unrelenting and detailed examination of thought processes.

The object of the therapy is to get the men to lead "impeccable" lives. Most rehabilitation is judged successful if the person gets a job and is not arrested again, says Samenow. But for these subjects, success means erasure of all criminal thought patterns and their replacement with responsible ones. So far, 9 of the 30 are considered successes. Others are not although they have stayed away from crime, because, for example, one is overspending and not sharing financial decision-making with his wife.

Is this an important study? From academia the reaction is predominantly negative although at least two teachers, including psychologist Richard Herrnstein of Harvard, are using the book in their courses. Methodological criticisms are legion. The sample is too small. There are no women in it. There is no way of knowing what extent the thought patterns are shared by the noncriminal population. There are multifarious small contradictions in the description. There are no demographic data on the individ-

uals—crimes committed, backgrounds, ages, race, and so forth (the majority were black, but no distinctions were made and none were allegedly found between those with different demographic or social backgrounds). The descriptions are regarded as too subjective to have any scientific validity.

As for the book on therapy, it has not been widely read but the general reaction is one of skepticism because the sample is so small that the results have no statistical significance; there is no evidence that the alleged rate of rehabilitation is any better than that among convicts who straighten out with age.

Samenow's answer to the methodological criticisms is that "this was never intended to be an experimental study." It is more in the nature of a collective case study. Besides, "What do the experimental design people have to show in their contribution to the criminal problem?" He disputes the need for controls in the volume 1 description. He adds, "Freud himself couldn't get a Ph.D. in an American university today." As for the meager success rate, Samenow argues that this is only a beginning and says he would welcome attempts to duplicate the efforts at St. Elizabeths.

But methodology aside, there are few cavils with the substantive findings of volume 1. *Science* called a sampling of people who work in universities, hospitals, and jails and found only three who disputed the description. Two prominent liberals refused to be quoted. One of them rejected the study out of hand because he believes the solution to crime lies in uncovering causes. He added, "They say it takes the same qualities to be a bank president as to be a robber. The robber would rather be president." Samenow might agree, but only on the grounds that the robber as president could have more worldly power and rob on a grander scale.

Another demurrer was Seymour Halleck of the University of North Carolina. Halleck, who has worked with prisoners, says that the work is "an opinion, not a study" and that although there are people who display many of the "criminal" traits some of the time, "they're not too different in their responses to treatment modalities than anyone else." Halleck says volume 1 contains useful information about "the phenomenology of the self-serving personality," criminal or otherwise.

People who work with criminals do not quibble with the fine points. "Everything spoke absolutely to my soul," says Robert Mills, a psychologist at the University of Cincinnati who spent 8 years working in a court psychiatric clinic. Mills says that he has no sympathy with those who rejected the study on methodological grounds. "If there's any message that sticks it's that the etiology of crime is not as relevant as we thought it was. . . . The liberals [among which he used to include himself] have been off target for the last 50 years. This is a breath of fresh air." Horvat of Terminal Island feels more or less the same way. "It gives us a wedge to begin to argue for a need for a pilot study" to test more realistic treatment techniques, he said.

In a field as utterly politics- and literature-ridden as criminology this study is unlikely to emerge as a major landmark. As Norval Morris, of the University of Chicago, says, "the search for 'the' criminal personality since Lombroso has been persistent and fruitless." But it is significant for at least two reasons: it is probably the most detailed description available of the thinking and behavior of very troublesome characters, and its emergence coincides with an emerging disaffection with the use of the medical model in treating social problems as well as drying up of sympathy for criminals themselves.

Grist for Hard-Liners

The findings obviously could be used by advocates of mandatory prison terms and capital punishment, for underlying the unappetizing portrayal of character is an unwavering philosophical assumption about human nature: that anyone who is not psychotic has free will and should therefore be held accountable for his behavior. In fact, the authors go even further, saying that people suffering from psychoses ordinarily do not commit crimes when having a psychotic episode. (Samenow even thinks that accused killer David Berkowitz, who almost everyone else considers "insane", is probably not.) The study therefore supports the contention—anathematic to liberals—of James Q. Wilson, professor of government at Harvard, that "wicked people exist."

But the rest of the message is that there are ways wicked people can be induced to change. Liberals, who were beating the drums of criminal rehabilitation in the 1950's and 1960's, are no longer buying that either. They have now retreated to high but barren ground: the current stance is that people can change but no one knows how to bring it about, so put the worst ones in jail, don't treat them too badly, and continue the search for causes of crime.

With liberal assumptions about causes of crime having led to bankruptcy in the solution department, the pendulum may be swinging back to what Saleem Shah calls "a more balanced approach" toward etiology. "There's been among social scientists a predictable discipline-related concern with the role of the environment in influencing behavior," says Shah. "But in the past 10 years there has been greater recognition that no matter what your ideological preferences, individual differences don't go away." Social and behavioral scientists are beginning to recognize that they have been neglecting biology for too long, and with new advances in biochemistry and genetics the antibiology taboo may be lifting. Shah mentioned specifically a study directed by psychologist Saranoff Mednick at the University of Southern California, indicating that a genetic factor having to do with a high threshold of arousal in the autonomic nervous system may be related to a proclivity for criminal behavior.*

The political implications of the St. Elizabeths findings are not all bad. Samenow told *Science* that he had anticipated a negative response from minority people, but "the black response has been uniformly positive. There is a kind of liberal racism—a condescension implicit in expecting people from bad backgrounds to behave badly. We're saying that wherever you're from, you [criminals] have more in common with each other."

The study also explains why "rehabilitation" does not work: there hasn't been any. An hour of group therapy a week will scarcely make a dent in the hardened criminal's self-concept, nor will a smattering of vocational training offer him an attractive alternative life-style. Samenow says that to make any headway with the population he has worked with, at least a year of daily therapy is required.

Some corrections officials have seized on the ideas in the book as offering them a new way to "get through to" the psychopathic personalities that have always turned the warmest hearts into cynics.

But society is unlikely to be willing to underwrite the huge costs that such intensive rehabilitation (the authors prefer to call it "habilitation") would entail.

There is no field so shot through with politics as crime and penology. Whether the Yochelson study is followed up or neglected will probably depend more on its congruence with prevailing political currents than on its intrinsic worth.

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*This feeds into the Yochelson findings: criminals seem to have to go to great lengths to get their kicks; conversely, they do not experience the anxiety that in other people is a deterrent to antisocial behavior.