

QUESTIONING THE "PARENTAL ABDICATION" THEORY. WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

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Sources and methods

This study covers research published in French and English over the last fifteen years. The material was collected by perusal of the periodicals specialized in the field, and reading of those books available in the Paris area. Some forty scientific journals published in the United States, England, Canada (in French and English), France, Belgium and Switzerland were consulted systematically or occasionally. An attempt was made to include studies in a number of disciplines, including criminology, sociology, anthropology, clinical psychology and psychiatry. Methodologically speaking, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were considered. For the former, special attention was given to research involving self-report delinquency surveys. The method consists in questioning a series of individuals on offenses previously committed by themselves, so as to avoid assessing offending on the sole basis of those individuals known to the police, the criminal justice system or social workers.

There are two other essential points concerning the analysis of an offenders' population. First, offending is an essentially male phenomenon, and research tends to concentrate on young men: female offenders are therefore not dealt with here. Secondly, the vast majority of studies focus on the most visible forms of offending, which are also the acts that receive most attention from political decision-makers and from the police and that are most punished. One outcome of this state of affairs is that those forms of offending committed by the lower classes are far more publicized than those committed by the more affluent.

During the 1990s, there was much talk by mayors of all leanings, as well as by congresspeople and ministers, of "the parental abdication", in attempts to explain why those "untamed kids" (as the previous minister of the Interior put it) were committing offenses. The idea of extending financial tutelage to these problem families or of purely and simply cutting off family allowances was brought up repeatedly. It was in this context that, in January 2000, the National Family Allowance Bureau (the CNAF) asked us to analyze academic findings on the relations between family life and delinquency.

The intention here is not to draw up a list of quantitative findings to put the stamp of scientificity on a series of assertions. Whereas the mass media and many decision-makers are looking for "figures", or more generally, facts and proof, it seems to us that the role of researchers is essentially to communicate an understanding of the thinking underlying the construction of such facts and proof, thanks to which figures may become meaningful. Actually, quantitative research may at best show that one factor is slightly more significant than another, but this in no way ascertains that it is a causal factor. For this reason, this paper will not confine itself to a presentation of the many tested correlations between some feature or other of family life and any kind of delinquent behavior. That sort of list would hardly be meaningful. The claim that lack of guidance and of discipline, lack of love and attention, excessive laxness or overly severe punishment, the direct or indirect learning of deviant behavior through the example of parents and brothers, parents' fragile mental health, dire poverty and the father's social withdrawal, etc., may be contributing factors in a child's committing of one type of offense or another in the future is not only hard to quantify, but above all it is an abstraction to the point of being insignificant and affording practically no information. *In actuality, families necessarily function as a system of complex interactions to be understood in their overall dynamic, which may be more or less criminogenic.*

Furthermore, and just as importantly, quantitative studies attempting to measure the impact of familial factors as opposed to other environmental factors (existence and role of an extended family, social and economic living conditions, environ-

ment and lifestyle, influence of peer groups for pre-adolescents and adolescents, etc.) point out that with the exception of cases of direct transmission of deviant behavior by the family itself (and these represent a minority of instances of offending), these factors do not suffice to explain why young people become delinquents. It is therefore important to look at the extra-familial determinants of the processes generating criminality, and to attempt to articulate the relations between factors at work inside and outside the family.

In this perspective, two broad categories of situations may be differentiated, with two main types of criminogenic processes involving the family in very different ways (but in no way implying that these two overall processes cover the totality of the infinite variety of individual situations). The first type is the individual whose deviant behavior, especially including unmotivated aggressiveness, is generally noticed during childhood, and is often repeatedly reported thereafter. Itineraries of this type seem to be intrinsically tied to a dysfunctional family. The second type includes individuals who do not become offenders until pre-adolescence, or even adolescence, and who only embark on a career of delinquency when factors outside the family push them to do so (or do not enable them to resist). This is a crucial distinction in the present context, where the terms "delinquency" and "delinquents" are used abusively, as if the acts and psycho-social profiles of the individuals involved represented homogeneous categories.

Before describing the two types of processes mentioned above, a detailed discussion of the influence of forms of family life on offending among children seems necessary, given the importance, on the French scene, of the themes of the crisis in family life and the pathological consequences of broken homes.

1. Single-parent families, divorce and delinquency among children

Many educators and psychologists are quite concerned with – and in fact worried about – the disruption of modern-day families, with questioning focusing on the effects of "the father's absence". Analysis of research on the presumed influence of broken homes (single-parent families) and of divorce on delinquency, and then on the evolution, over time, in the relations

between family life and delinquency, has led to the following findings.

Firstly, and unambiguously, while divorces, separations, single-parent and recomposed families represent sources of suffering, anxiety and doubts of all sorts, there is no direct, significant connection between such suffering, anxiety and doubts and offending or violent behavior. There is one single exception to this rule : consumption of drugs (especially soft drugs), which admittedly does not in itself represent a disturbance of public order, no less an assault of any kind on property or human life.

Generally speaking, research analyzing the role of the family leads to the conclusion that relational factors play a more decisive part than structural ones. In other words, a broken home is less important than parents who do not get along well. It is the existence of a serious conflict between a child's parents that makes him a potential offender, rather than the fact that they live together or are separated. Moreover, research shows that the atmosphere within the family is partially dependent on its socio-economic difficulties, and hence, that those family situations that are most "at-risk" are those that combine parental conflict and economic insecurity.

One last point concerning the forms of family life : in many respects, there is good reason to pay greater attention to large families when seeking those factors that are statistically significant for juvenile delinquency. The over-representation of large families is relativised, however, when socio-economic variables are considered, the reason being that in most Western countries it is in the underprivileged classes that large, and even very large families are found.

2. Early socialization disorders and the intergenerational reproduction of violence

Here we come to the question of children's early aggressiveness and asocial behavior, dysfunctional families and the intergenerational reproduction of violence. Among the many explanations advanced by psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and criminologists to account for familial dysfunctioning, some of the most interesting approaches are systemic. In brief : a child's emotional, social and sexual behavior is structured, fundamentally, during his or her earliest years, through relations with the mother and subsequently with the mother's affective environment. When the mother deliberately or involuntarily adopts a distant, cold or even aggressive attitude toward her child, this early emotional deprivation may disturb the child's development temporarily or permanently. This is the classical pattern described by the attachment theory. However, psychoanalysis has long ago pointed to pathological attachment processes of a very different kind in which, unlike the previously described situation, the mother invests her child with an excessive emotional charge, to the point of preventing his or her personal development by exerting a great psychological empire over the child, sometimes to the point of physical violence. This also prevents the normal establishment of what psychoanalysis terms the "Oedipal triangle" (the system of relations between mother, father and child), and hence, the proper construction of the boy's identity in his relation with his father (or some surrogate thereof). Next, the systemic approach has brought to light a series of other conjugal or familial situations that are potentially highly disturbing for the child's emotional and sexual balance, with emphasis on the nature of conjugal relations, in particular, and on the child's place in interactions between the parents.

All of these divergent theories do agree on one point. That is, the family is the direct cause of a series of psychological dysfunctions, some of which lead children to commit offenses and crimes of vari-

ous sorts (mistreatment, incest, sexual abuse of other children, rapes of various sorts, murder). Even more serious is the fact that both qualitatively and quantitatively speaking, there are powerful mechanisms involving the intergenerational transmission of criminogenic familial dysfunctions, although this does not necessarily take the form of simple replication of behavior.

Last, a synthesis of research on the subject calls for some additional remarks. For one thing, quantitatively speaking, these families and these processes are not found in the same proportions in different social milieus ; although they may, potentially, occur everywhere, they are apparently much more frequent in the most underprivileged environments. Secondly, and this corroborates the previous point, the dysfunctional parental situations evidenced are usually attended by abuse of alcohol and "depression" (in the broad acceptance), both of which are what psychiatrists sometimes call "social pathologies", in the sense that they are directly tied to the socio-economic living conditions of the individuals involved.

3. Parental control of the risk of offending during pre-adolescence

We now come to the final point, the role of the family in the ordinary and most frequent modes of becoming a delinquent, during pre-adolescence or adolescence. Indeed, the role of the family is not confined to *directly* generating the child's future psychological disorders, some of which will lead him to offending. Most families whose children become delinquents do not show any significant sign of emotional dysfunction. It should be recalled, then, that the role of the family does not stop at establishing those basic emotional and educational processes. It continues *indirectly*, or *preventively*, in that it guides the child's evolution until the end of adolescence. Pre-adolescence is a particularly delicate time with respect to becoming a delinquent. We can use the expression "ordinary juvenile delinquent" ("endemic", as sociologist J.C. CHAMBOREDON put it in a famous article written almost thirty years ago¹), inasmuch as in some social environments (in neighborhoods where the population is poor and stigmatized), in some contexts (tribulations of peer groups) and at some ages (mostly from pre-adolescence to mid-adolescence) it constitutes a particularly likely possibility for individuals who are not characterized by any particular deprivation or mistreatment, including psychological : in other words, with no functional psychopathology. This means that the main point is *the quality of parental control* ; that is, the quality of the family's reaction to the first excesses of its pre-adolescents.

The family may be said to be responsible for this control in the sense that no-one can really replace it. All the same, we cannot seriously claim that families with no psychological disorders deliberately choose not to do anything and to allow their children to go down a dark corridor without any exit worthy of the name. When families fail it is because they are subjected to forces too strong to resist. In other words, in most cases, socio-economic factors definitely seem to be the most decisive determinants – albeit indirect ones – in producing delinquents. The fact is that they are responsible, to a large extent, for parents' incapacity to control their children. The most flagrant case is, apparently, the one in which the parents' (and especially the father's) psychological state is deteriorated by their social situation to the point where they are incapable of intervening adequately. Poor control takes the form of oscillation between the two poles of passiveness and withdrawal, on the one hand, and disproportionate, insufficiently intellectually integrated, violent punishment on the other. But again, any discourse favoring normative, integrative behavior may be discredited or its credibility

¹ CHAMBOREDON (J.C.), La délinquance juvénile, essai de construction d'objet, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 1971, 12 (3), pp. 335-377.

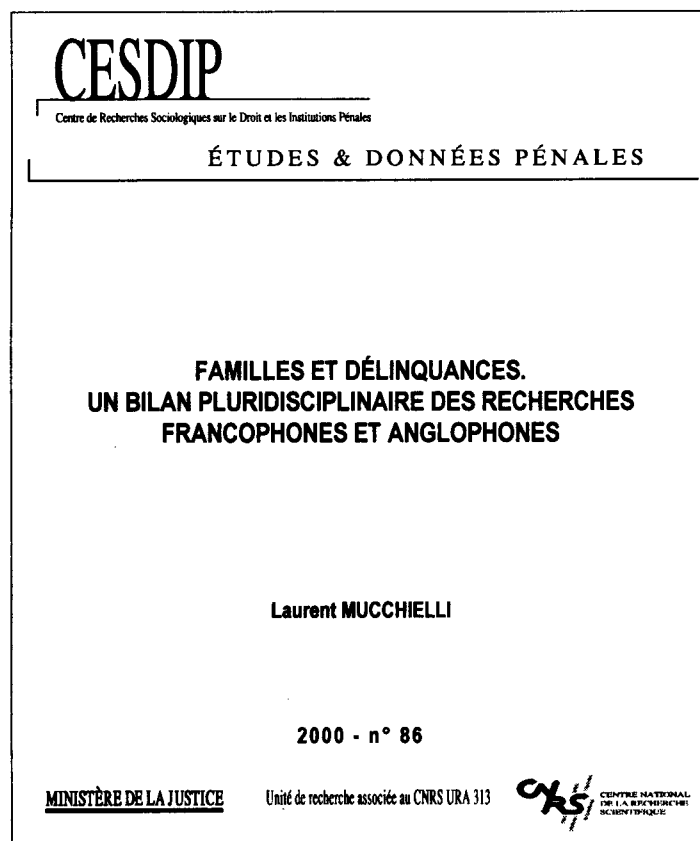
ruined in advance by the parents' social position. Why should parents be taken seriously when their own social position is in flagrant contradiction with the promise of an acceptable social destiny? All it takes is an older brother who is "hassling" with the problem of finding a job although he has a low-level technician's degree, for the younger brother to question the possibility of doing any better, himself. If, in addition, the context is characterized by stigmatization of various kinds (a neighborhood with a poor reputation, racism, social work, constant checks by the police, etc.), no more is needed for parents to find themselves quite powerless when their young sons lose interest at school, then start committing offenses.

In the last analysis, concern about a "crisis in the family" and "parental abdication" seems quite unfounded. Rather, there should be more thinking about the definition of at-risk family situations and an analysis of the processes of social relegation that encourage juvenile delinquency and at the same time reduce parents' ability to control their children.

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