

Ray Jones

REVERSALS, DELINQUENCY & FUN

One of my interests is how delinquents view their delinquency and how they view the reactions of others to their delinquency. Here I wish to relate some of the findings of my inquiries about these matters to the theory of psycho-logical reversals as described and documented elsewhere in this edition of *Self and Society*. The theory argues, amongst other things, that people switch under various circumstances between two states of mind: the telic and paratelic states. The former is characterised as being serious, goal-oriented, arousal avoiding and displays a tendency to plan ahead; the latter is characterised as light hearted, playful, activity-oriented, arousal seeking and spontaneous. Arousal experienced in the telic state is felt as 'anxiety' but in the paratelic state is felt as 'excitement'.

Acting Delinquent

Two common, but opposing, stereotypes of delinquents are that either (a) they are motivated by greed or are seeking material gain (eg. through thefts or mugging), or (b) they are involved in senseless or stupid behaviour (eg. vandalism). It could be argued that these stereotypes are based on a telic mode of understanding: behaviour only makes sense if it is serious minded and has goals.

Delinquents themselves offer a different, more paratelic account of their delinquency: 'it was fun'. They rationalise their delinquency not in terms of trying to achieve some goal but in terms of the action being an end in itself. The delinquent act leads to excitement because there is risk-taking and a chance of being caught as well as a feeling that being deviant is arousing of itself. Excitement in the paratelic state involves high arousal, which many delinquents frequently say is a major motivation for their action, and this is experienced as pleasant, as this extract from a taped interview with young people at an intermediate treatment unit makes clear:

Ray: So, why did they nick things last week?
Mick: 'Cos they were bored, weren't they?
Andy: No, because they thought it was big.
Ray: Is that why you got into trouble, Andy?
Andy: Yeah, 'cos I thought it was daring. Mi mates dared me.
Chris: No, last week they did it, cos it was boring at the time
. . . there was nothing else happening.

But for those in the telic state of mind (eg. police, teachers, parents, social workers, counsellors, child psychiatrists, and others) when viewing this delinquent behaviour, the fact that these kids have acted in a delinquent way generates arousal which they experience as unpleasant. The observers get to feel threatened by the arousal rather than excited by it.

Delinquency and Negativism

Delinquency is characteristically associated with adolescence. Mike Apter and Ken Smith have written elsewhere about the period of negativism which many experience during adolescence. (1) Their explanation and documentation of negativism in adolescence may help to account for the prevalence of juvenile delinquency. Within the theory of reversals conformity-negativism are seen as another pair of bistable states which people use in the same way as they use the telic:paratelic pair - they reverse between being negative and being conforming. The telic:paratelic and the negativistic:conforming pairs may occur in different combinations. For example, an individual may gain excitement through negativism. If the adolescent rejects conformist options in favour of fun and excitement, he is thus directed towards negativistic options. The concept of negativism as an explanation of delinquency can, however, be over-stated. For many young people conformist options (eg. success at school or getting a good job) are denied to them. They are directed towards negativism rather than choose it.

Just as negativism can be seen to have its functions, so also can delinquency. Some of the individual-oriented functions of delinquency have already been mentioned -excitement, fun, relief of boredom are examples. Deviance (including delinquency) can also be seen to have important social functions. These include highlighting the normative boundaries of a society and establishing internal community cohesion and commitment by polarising deviant and non-deviant groups. These

are the conservative social functions of deviance, though we should also be aware that many forms of deviance can and do encourage social change.

Delinquent and Intervention Programmes

Programmes to 'prevent' delinquency can be characterised as responding to the assumptions noted at the beginning of this article. These are: (a) delinquency is goal oriented, so the programme needs either to increase the cost of achieving the goals the delinquent has (punishment strategy) or provide alternative goals (diversion strategy); (b) delinquency is senseless, therefore there must be some personality or psychological defect in the delinquent which needs treatment (treatment strategy).

Since a majority of delinquents appear to view their delinquency in a paratelic way - it is about having excitement through highly arousing action - they do not regard themselves as in need of treatment. They have also developed many techniques of neutralisation to counter the claims that they should be punished. These include: (a) denial of responsibility - 'I didn't mean to do it'; (b) denial of injury - 'well, no one got hurt'; (c) denial of victim - 'it was a fair fight, they had it coming to 'em'; (d) condemnation of the condemners - 'you always pick on me, it 'aint fair' and (e) appeal to higher loyalties - 'I only did it for my friends'. Attempts to treat delinquents are most often seen by delinquents as a part of their problems rather than as a contribution to the solution of their problems. This quote from the work of a colleague makes this clear:

Boys are more concerned with getting out of trouble than with analysing how they got into trouble. For them, trouble means getting caught and being sent to an approved school. Their concern is to get out of approved school. Trouble as defined by (the approved school) staff and other agencies, namely offences committed and anti-social behaviour, is not something boys see as requiring explanation. Walter, 1978 (2).

Delinquents see many of the delinquency prevention programmes as boring. One said: 'in supervision you sit down in a boring old chair and talk about how we're getting on and things'. The programmes appear to the delinquent as unpleasant partly because they inflict a prolonged period of low arousal activity upon them

which they regard as unpleasant - being paratelicly oriented they prefer high arousal and excitement. It seems to me that delinquents need high arousal.

So, what should we do? First, we should accept the delinquents frequently stated wish for high arousal and excitement by providing programmes which are fun and stimulating in their own right. In essence this is the diversionary strategy, but with diversion seen as a statement about process rather than as a statement about goals. This strategy also has the advantage that it is then acceptable to the delinquents understanding of why he got into trouble in the past: he got into trouble whilst mucking about with his mates on the street. Programmes geared to stimulating and creating fun and enjoyment for him and his mates on the street might be seen by them as helping to keep trouble at bay.

Secondly, whilst counsellors, teachers, parents and others are involved in activities with adolescents they will note that the delinquent reverses into a telic state from the paratelic state on a number of occasions. When this happens, it becomes possible to allow the delinquent to see what his actions look like from a telic perspective. This possibility is illustrated by these comments from the group introduced earlier:

Ray: What's the point of this Group?

Chris: We get to do things we wouldn't do usually.

Wendy: That's only a part of it though, isn't it?

Andy: It helps guide us on the right lines.

Wendy: I can't see how?

Andy: Well, we're talking about things more. More than we would at home and thinking things ourselves instead of having another adult thinking for us. Down here we talk more about the things wwe should be doing instead of what we shouldn't be doing, and we're talking about reasoning with each other instead of going to parents all the time.

Conclusions

I have written this short paper to document some ways in which reversal theory have helped me to understand both delinquency and the difficulties associated with 'treatment' programmes. These are preliminary ideas. I hope you find them of interest.