

First Memories of "Normal" and of "Delinquent" Girls

PAUL PLOTTKE, *Kent, England*

INTRODUCTION

According to Adler, "Early recollections give us hints and clues which are most valuable to follow when attempting the task of finding the direction of a person's striving. They are most helpful in revealing what one regards as values to be aimed for and what one senses as dangers to be avoided. They help us to see the kind of world which a particular person feels he is living in, and the ways he early found of meeting that world. They illuminate the origins of the style of life." (1, p. 287)

We feel it essential to understand this life-style in each case where we desire to give an individual help, however short or sporadic may be our talks with the person to be redirected. And we believe that without revealing to him the errors in his life-style, no work or group therapy can yield any satisfactory and permanent results. "Education," Adler holds, "means not only allowing favorable influences to have their effect, but also ascertaining exactly what the creative power of the child has formed out of them, in order afterwards to smooth the path to improvement in the case of faulty formation." (2, p. 15)

It is the purpose of this study to compare the early recollections of "normal" and "delinquent" girls in an attempt to discover differences between the two groups which may be significant for differences in life-style.

PROCEDURE

This article is based on data collected by the author with the help of two co-workers from papers on "My First Childhood Recollection," fifty of which were written by girls about fourteen years old in a normal day school near Paris, and fifty by "delinquent" girls between fifteen and nineteen, retained in a Catholic institution for reeducation.

We recognize that from a statistical point of view, the total of 100 papers is not large; that there is an age difference between the two groups; that different mentalities prevail amongst those who are in a state school and mostly from indifferent parents and those who are in a strictly Catholic atmosphere. Our figures mean only what they say as regards the two groups studied, and we shall call, A, the fifty more or less "normal" girls, and B, the "delinquent" girls under religious psycho-pedagogical treatment.

RESULTS

I. <i>Length of papers (in lines)</i>	A	B
Maximum	22	57
Minimum	5	6
Simple average	11	18

Apparently the older "delinquent" girls were more talkative than the younger school girls.

II. *General character of recollections*

Grouping each set of papers as to their general human character we found:

	A	B
More positive, optimistic recollections	36%	8%
More negative, pessimistic recollections	64%	92%

Whereas only about a third of the "normal" children have more or less agreeable first recollections, these are very rare indeed with the "delinquent" girls. These figures seem to confirm Adlerian findings that delinquents who are in active opposition to the ordinary world will most often remember bad things as a warning to keep them on the warpath.

III. *Emotions occurring in the first recollections*

	A	B
Laughter	6%	—
Tears	34%	14%
Indifference on these points	60%	86%

IV. Certain adults mention a punishment as the first event they remember. In general this would indicate their very feeble belief in human cooperation on a basis of equality. Our papers confirm this:

<i>Punishments remembered</i>	A	B
Being beaten	12%	20%
scolded	2%	12%
deprived of dessert	6%	—
sent to bed before time	2%	2%
sent home from holiday	—	2%

Punishments of most kinds, therefore, play a bigger role in the memories of our "delinquents," which corroborates the findings under heading II.

V. *Persons who people the two worlds of memories*

1. The absolute numbers of persons mentioned are 92 120

That is, for each three persons in the memory worlds of the "normals," there are four in those of the "delinquents." The following two tables give some specifications:

2. <i>Number of persons mentioned</i>	A	B
0	8%	2%
1	32%	34%
2	40%	31%
3	12%	7%
4	4%	16%
5	4%	4%
6	—	4%
7	—	2%

In the two groups, the number of those who mention one and two persons in their recollections—the majority—is nearly the same. But four times more “normals” than “delinquents” mention no other person at all, only things and themselves; they show thus a striking lack of human contact; and whereas only 8% of the “normals” mention more than three persons, 26% of the “delinquents” did so.

There are also certain differences between the two groups as to

3. <i>The kind of persons mentioned</i>	A	B
Mother	52%	68%
Father	14%	28%
Brothers and sisters	10%	40%
Parents (as a unit)	10%	4%
Grandmother	16%	6%
Grandfather	4%	2%
Other relatives	14%	16%
Friends and comrades	8%	16%
Medical persons	24%	8%
Others	20%	28%

It is striking that the mother as well as the father is more often mentioned by B (96%) than by A (66%). It could, however, be expected that our “normal” girls are from smaller families than the others as hinted at by the respective figures for brothers and sisters (10 against 40); they also remember fewer friends (8:16) and more pampering grandparents (20:8). The intervention of medical persons occurred in the recollections of the “good” girls three times more often (24:8) than in those of the “bad” girls. This latter assumption can also be made from the following figures:

VI. *Age at time of first recollection*

Every subject indicated how old she believed herself to have been when the first remembered event occurred. The age limits are two and twelve years; the distribution is as follows:

The memory concerns the age of

	A	B
2 years	26%	2%
3	22%	6%
4	32%	20%
5	4%	28%
6	10%	22%
7	2%	8%
8	4%	4%
9	—	2%
10	—	4%
11	—	—
12	—	4%

Whereas 48% of A have their first memory at two and three years, only 8% of B refer to the same period; and while no "normal" girl places her first recollection after eight years, 10% of the "delinquent" girls do so. On the whole, therefore, the recollection world of A lies much nearer birth than that of B, which may mean that our "normal" and pampered children find more often in their earliest days the material to express and to confirm their life-style than our "delinquent" ones who chose for this purpose later years when fighting situations can be supposed to be more numerous. As we know from Adler's findings that unhappy early years are forgotten more easily than happy ones, these figures are a confirmation. They also give some indication of the high degree of pampering prevailing in French families.

VII. *Attitude toward being deceived by parents*

The paper of only one "normal" girl (2%) indicates that she was aware of a harmless lie on the part of adults towards her; but there are seven papers of the "delinquent" girls (14%) which speak more or less vehemently about having been abused in their credulity.

We surely do not mean to say that the facts of the deception mentioned were, like a Freudian "trauma," the cause of the later misbehavior; rather do we think that girls who have been arrested and have not yet changed their life-style will remember suitably now having been deceived by adults, as if they meant to say thereby, "They have deceived me; was I not right then to act against their world?"

Amongst people under the Christian "pattern of culture"³ there are a number of fictions which children must sooner or later discover to be such; e.g., Santa Claus, the birth of children through other channels than the mother; the infallibility of a particular religion as contrasted with others. Discovering the lack of validity in these beliefs will impress different

children differently according to their life-style in the making, which in return will be influenced by these stories. None of our cases mentions the stork story; the deception reported in the seven cases under discussion was due to realizing the truth

	<i>Number of papers</i>
About Santa Claus	4
About the bells flying to Rome on Good Friday	1
About a practical joke based on the child's verbal ignorance	1
About a false promise	1

It will probably be difficult to restore confidence in others to the girl who writes about her mother taking her by surprise to school, when she had been promised a visit to a toy shop. In her very primitive paper she indicated neither her age nor her name (as all the others did). Only a few words were correctly spelled. Not having been honestly prepared for and taken to school, how could she have liked it and made progress in mastering her language?

One girl of over fifteen, probably an orphan, who remembers how at five years of age the superiors in a Catholic institution made an April fool of her, also remembers how she blushed when finding it out. Her strong feeling of inferiority expressed by this emotion led her to an erroneous compensation which she formulates thus: "Since this day, I decided never to allow again anybody to take me in!" Much more active and intelligent than the other girl, she will have to learn that her infantile private truth must be enlarged into a common sense shared with others.

Two of the girls endeavored to compensate for the deception by propagating the new truth, but in different ways. One, writing neatly and ending by saying that she was cross at herself because she had believed so long in Santa Claus, quickly informed all her classmates that the old man was an invention of adults. Her truth propaganda has a flavor of aggressiveness against the grownups. The other girl who tells a similar story ends by saying, "Later I shall make my children understand all about Santa Claus so that they will not have the same deception." We would consider her a very social being if in her paper she had not presented herself as a model child and exhibited her perfection in order to diminish her elder brother.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, the earliest recollections of "delinquent" girls seem to differ from those of so-called normal girls in the following characteristics:

1. They are more active.
2. They are more pessimistic and exhibit less emotion.
3. They involve more punishment.

4. They indicate richer (if not more harmonious) social relations.
5. They occur later in childhood.
6. They reveal a greater sense of being abused through deception by parents.

REFERENCES

- ¹ADLER, ALFRED: "Significance of early recollections," *Intern. Journ. of Indiv. Psych.*, 1937/4.
- ²ADLER, ALFRED'S *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*, 1938.
(*Sinn des Lebens*, 1933).
- ³BENEDICT, RUTH: *Patterns of Culture*, 1934.