

Gender Difference in Pupil Deviance

In Ireland, as in other countries, a disproportionate number of the population in residential provision for young offenders is male. What differences exist in the types of anti-social behaviours exhibited by boys and by girls? Can reasons for these differences be identified?

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Department of Education and Science, in Ireland a young offender is a person between the ages of seven and sixteen years who has been brought before a court for an offence and has been found guilty of that offence, knowing it to be wrong. In this and in other countries statistics show an overwhelming preponderance of boys in the populations of residential special provision for young offenders. Similarly, in schools and units for students categorised as having “emotional and behavioural disorders,” boys outnumber girls by a factor of almost 6:1 (Cooper, Upton and Smith, 1991).

RATIOS OF BOYS AND GIRLS IN SPECIAL PROVISION

Figures regarding juvenile crime show that the vast majority of reported crimes are perpetrated by males - in 1994, there were 12,467 crimes committed by males compared to only 2,253 by females (Garda Siochana Crime Bureau). In Ireland there are five residential centres for young offenders – Trinity House School, Finglas Children’s Centre, St. Joseph’s School, Clonmel, Oberstown Boys’ Centre and Oberstown Girls’ Centre. These centres cater for 226 young people, 210 of which are places specifically for boys and only 16 of which are for girls. This disproportion is also reflected in a prison context with figures showing that women prisoners today make up only about 2% of the total prison population. Figures for residential care units in Ireland catering for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties indicate a ratio of two boys to one girl.

The United Kingdom shows a similar disproportion. There are 40 young offender institutions in England, 35 of which cater for male and only 5 of which cater for female

offenders (Lloyd-Smith, 1992). Cooper et al. (1991) conducted the first large sample study of the gender makeup of the populations of schools and units for emotional and behavioural difficulties in England and Wales in 1991. Their findings show a ratio of 5.7 boys to every one girl in a sample of 8556 students in 209 facilities.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PUPIL BEHAVIOUR

Definitions of “disruptive” or “conformist” behaviour are notoriously subjective and vary widely between teachers and schools. One area of non-conformity that may be easier to measure is that of truancy. In her study of young offenders, Bates (1996) found that 84% of the subjects had a history of absenteeism and truanting. While there is little evidence that boys truant more than girls, several studies suggest that male truants move into delinquency while female truancy is not particularly associated with delinquent behaviour (Mawby, 1977; Sharpe, 1976).

In its 1993 survey on discipline in schools the INTO identified misbehaviours which teachers considered to be serious and those they considered to be minor, as follows:

SERIOUS MISBEHAVIOURS

- **Physical assault on teacher**
- **Entering school premises after hours with malicious intent**
- **Threatened assault on teachers**
- **Vandalism**
- **Theft**
- **Bullying**

MINOR MISBEHAVIOURS

- **Talking out of turn**
- **Distracting other pupils**
- **Out of seat without permission**
- **Unruliness in corridors**
- **Persistent infringement of school rules**

The results of this survey indicated that girls' schools had the lowest incidences of misbehaviour in all categories. Boys' schools had by far the highest incidences and mixed schools were in the middle. This survey suggests that actual behaviour differences do exist at least at primary level. Further evidence is found in research on behaviour problems among primary school children in Dublin by McCarthy and O'Boyle (1988). This research found that 17% of all children showed a marked conduct disorder with boys showing significantly higher levels than girls.

Studies indicate that behaviourally females are more often depressed, withdrawn and anxious and tend to internalise their feelings more than males (Epstein, Cullinan and Lloyd, 1986). While on the one hand girls are perceived by teachers to exhibit more 'conformist' behaviour (King, 1974) it is suggested that girls' behaviour problems, when they occur, appear to teachers to be 'deep-seated' (Davies, 1984).

MORE BOYS IN SPECIAL PROVISION: THEORIES

Biological explanations

One explanation for female conformity is that women are predisposed to react to the world in different ways to men by virtue of their physical differences (reproductive organs, hormones, size, strength etc.). In this theory, the female's maternal caring function explains her greater passivity and the female delinquent is often viewed to be far more 'abnormal' than her male counterpart since delinquency is such a perversion of her natural female role.

In studies of delinquent behaviour the association between gender and aggression is often highlighted. Research consistently concludes that boys are more aggressive than girls (e.g. Hyde, 1984). However, there is much evidence to suggest that socialisation plays a vital role in promoting aggression. Tieger (1980) suggests that parents often hold sex role stereotypes and play with boys in ways that promote aggression. It is also important to bear in mind that not all criminal acts involve aggression anyway. Blackmail, fraud,

burglary and prostitution may involve no aggressive component at all. Nevertheless the genetic argument relating to gender and aggression is often used to explain the focus on male delinquency.

The biological theory in its purest form is further challenged on the grounds that agreement between sex and gender orientation is not always inevitable. A study by Hampson and Hampson (1965) identified 19 patients who had been brought up in a manner that contradicted their chromatin patterns and who developed a satisfactory gender identity. They concluded that the social factors of rearing largely over-ride biological factors.

It seems clear therefore that biological factors cannot be seen in isolation. Teachers in a study by Davies (1984) felt that girls' physical characteristics such as earlier maturity needed to be seen in the context of their social interactions. The teachers felt that because girls mature earlier than boys that they tended to be more conscientious. However it also presented problems, their chain of reasoning being that since girls look and feel older, their circle of friends/boyfriends tends to be older and they have a social life outside school based on 'adult' values and concerns. This could lead to a lower boredom threshold for school and a sense that school was childish and irrelevant.

Peer pressure

Over the past 25 years the peer group has been increasingly recognised as a significant force in the development of children's cognitive, emotional and social competence. Studies show that peer conformity behaviour increases from childhood through adolescence. Since adolescents generally want to belong to a group, students who experience learning difficulties may feel left out in school. This lack of acceptance by academically able students may encourage students with learning difficulties to join street gangs, the leaders of which accept these students as they may want them to engage in illegal acts (Winters, 1997). It has been suggested that, academically, girls appear to compensate better for learning difficulties than do boys (Pennington, 1991). In light of the above theories, this may partly explain the apparent smaller numbers of female delinquents.

There is evidence to suggest that while male and female adolescents do not differ significantly in their own perceptions of peer pressure, in terms of actual behaviour, males are more likely to submit than females. A study by Brown, Clasen and Eicher (1986) examined males' and females' willingness to follow peers in 20 hypothetical situations, some situations involving 'pro-social' behaviour, some situations involving 'neutral' behaviour and some involving 'anti-social' behaviour such as cheating, stealing and trespassing. While no significant gender differences were noted in situations involving pro-social or neutral behaviour, significant differences were noted in response to anti-social behaviour, with females less willing than males to follow peers. In light of this evidence, it seems possible that subtle gender variations exist in teenagers' conformity behaviour, with males more susceptible to peer pressure than females.

The labelling theory

Social theorists, focusing on the concept of deviance, propose what is commonly referred to as the 'labelling theory,' the essence of which is that deviance arises not when a person commits certain kinds of acts, but rather when some other person defines the act as deviant. Thus "...the deviant is one to whom the label has been successfully applied. Deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label" (Becker, 1963).

The labelling theory raises some issues regarding the sex differences in problem behaviour in schools. The first issue is whether or not the criteria used to label male deviance are different to those used to label female deviance. Crozier and Antsiss (1995), in their study of girls' experiences of disruption, suggest that one main reason for the focus on boys in the area of deviance is that the majority of the teacher's attention is directed towards boys' disruptive behaviour as opposed to that displayed by girls. They quote the Elton Report (1989) which describes physical aggression towards teachers and physical destructiveness as being more serious examples of pupil indiscipline.

Crozier et al. go on to comment that these are predominantly male behaviours and therefore contribute to a greater focus on boys' behaviour in schools. The previously cited

INTO survey on school discipline (1993) found similar distinctions made by teachers between serious and minor misbehaviours. In their conclusion, Crozier and Antsiss maintain that girls present less of a challenge in school. They suggest that disruption by girls is likely to take less active forms in the classroom to that of boys and that, because of the criteria used to define disruption in classes, i.e. that which emphasises physical 'acting out' behaviour, that girls' needs tend to be overlooked.

The second issue relating to the labelling theory is that of whether or not there is differential processing of females by the various agencies which deal with 'problem' children. One theory is that, because more boys are excluded from schools and referred to special provision, that the special provision in turn predominantly caters for boys. Consequently, where a girl's need for such provision is identified, the choices in terms of placement are few and girls tend to be returned to mainstream whatever their needs (Crozier & Antsiss, 1995). Davies suggests however that it is possible that the difficulties experienced by girls are in fact more adequately addressed in mainstream schools.

However, in a study by Lloyd and Padfield (1996), the fact that there were many fewer girls in alternative schools and units was explained by the Heads of such schools by the fact that it was actually their policy to ensure that girls were in the minority. Their reasons were: (i) that girls were more motivated by group pressures, using it against teachers in more negative ways than boys; (ii) that girls mature more quickly than boys, become aware of their sexuality and as such pose a bigger challenge to staff; and (iii) that girls personalise when reprimanded and tend to bear grudges for some time while boys may act out immediately but quickly forget it.

There is also evidence to suggest differential processing by the police in relation to male and female juvenile offenders. In her account of *Girl Delinquents*, Campbell (1981) found a much more equal sex balance of actual offences than was indicated by the official crime statistics. She cites various reasons for this. Firstly, some typical female offences such as shoplifting may not get reported to the police; secondly, there are differential police practices in apprehension; and thirdly, the discretion used by the police in charging may favour females. Campbell maintains that since men are supposedly aggressive and

competitive by nature, it is considered 'normal' for a percentage of them to be criminal. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be passive and cooperative and so female criminality tends to be explained in terms of personal maladjustment. Thus "while delinquent boys are censured, girls more often attract sympathy and are labelled as being in need of care and protection" (Campbell, p.145).

Socialisation

The fact that, in practically every culture, boys and girls are brought up differently from each other is well documented. Two aspects of sex role socialisation have particular relevance for studies on deviancy, namely aggression and conformity. Some studies indicate a gender difference in the reasons for referral to special provision, with boys more often referred to special placement for aggressive and destructive behaviour and girls more often referred for personality problems, e.g. excessive fears and worries (Chesler, 1972).

Other studies show that, although women display less overt aggression, they reveal more anxiety about it and more hidden hostility (King, 1974). King suggests that women are at least as aggressive as men, but that society forces them to channel that aggression. There is evidence to suggest that such societal forces start early. In a longitudinal study by Newson and Newson (1976), the mothers surveyed reported that, while girls displayed more aggression at home than boys, when quarrelling with friends, they did so by shouting, while boys did so by physically fighting. The Newsons comment that this is related to "a cultural understanding that it is neither seemly nor safe to allow little girls to brawl in public places" (p. 156). Hence, whether or not there is a biological reason for the sex differences in display of aggression, it appears that social learning at least, directs the correct expression of such traits.

Regarding the issue of conformity, social theorists suggest that girls are subjected to greater pressure to conform than are boys. In her tests on attitudes towards non-conformity, Morris (1965) found that more shame was felt by girls than by boys when they were questioned about having been in trouble with the police. Whether the girls

really did feel guilty or whether they were responding to what they saw as the expectations of conformity is difficult to ascertain but either way the pressure on girls towards conformity is clear.

In examining the effect of socialisation, the context in which the social action occurs is significant. For instance, there are clearly circumstances such as war or threat to offspring when females can be just as aggressive as males. There is evidence that, when females are given permission, directly or indirectly to show aggression, they will do so. In the classic experiment by Leventhal, Scheinberg and Van Schoelandt (1968), subjects had to teach another person a concept using mild electric shocks as feedback to that person on his progress. The subjects were then told that strong shocks after an error produced faster learning. No differences were found between the sexes in the average intensity of the shock employed. Socialisation thus seems, at best, to have a tenuous hold on future behaviours and not to be a determinant of role conformity.

CONCLUSION

It appears that gender differences do exist not only in behaviour but also in the way in which teachers can interpret and react to this behaviour. Evidence has indicated that boys' disruptive behaviour in school is of a more physical and overt nature and receives far more teacher time than does the disruptive behaviour of girls. While several theories attempt to explain the gender imbalances in schools for pupils with maladjusted behaviour, clearly none of them in isolation is sufficient. They undoubtedly interact to form a theoretical framework which in itself is of only limited use, not only because each individual case is different, but also because our theories need to be seen in the context of our economic, social and political situation. Undoubtedly, it is the interaction of these forces, to lesser or greater degrees, that shape the life experiences of boys and girls in ways which are unmistakably different.

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