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Problems in the identification of 'antisocial behaviours' in children and young people

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This article critically examines the contents of an Executive Summary of a recent study of 'antisocial behaviour' among a cohort of adolescents in Victoria. It is argued that in both theoretical and methodological terms the study suffers from a number of serious shortcomings that may have serious implications for certain populations if ensuing policies are translated into practice. Additionally, the general theoretical trajectory of the study fits into the new culture of 'risk management' which also has important implications for those populations defined by the powerful as aberrant or troublesome.

Published in October 2002, *Patterns and Precursors of Adolescent Antisocial Behaviour* is the Executive Summary (ES) of a report by the same name published in December 2002 (Australian Temperament Project 2002a). At the time of writing the full report had not yet been published. However, the ES provides the core findings of the fuller report and therefore warrants attention in its own right, particularly as a source that has been widely accessed since its publication. Based on a collaborative study between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria, Department of Justice, the report and ES derive from a large scale, longitudinal study of 2,443 Victorian children and their parents. Beginning in 1983, the study comprised several 'waves' of research based on annual or bi-annual mail surveys designed to cover issues relating to various age cohorts between infancy (aged 4-8 months) and 17-18 years of age. These issues included:

... the child's temperament, behavioural and emotional adjustment, academic progress, health, social skills, peer and family relationships, as well as family functioning, parenting practices and family socio-demographic background (Australian Temperament Project 2002b: 2)¹.

As part of a more general study called the 'Australian Temperament Project: A study of development from infancy to adulthood' (ATP), the Victorian study claims to be among the first in Australia to 'examine the precursors and pathways to antisocial behaviour from the earliest years of life' (ATP 2002b: 2). This article develops a critical overview of the epistemological assumptions and conclusions that flow from the ES. We seek to situate the study in a wider discursive context that is characterised by a growing emphasis on developmental approaches to crime prevention/reduction. Specifically, we demonstrate that the Victorian study has much in common (both theoretically and practically) with a number of other developmental crime control discourses that can be traced back to the works of British and American child psychologists of the 1940s and 1950s.

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¹ For the sake of convenience we have grouped the contributors to the Victorian study under the authorship of the Australian Temperament Project. The Victorian study is an important part of this more general project.

Although we are mindful of the restricted nature of an ES in terms of its contents, this review has been undertaken for three primary reasons: first, the findings in the ES have already received considerable public attention and have been reported prominently in the national media; second, the findings have been reported at a recent major conference on childhood held in Sydney, organised by the Australian Institute of Family Studies², and third, executive summaries provide a convenient shorthand for more substantial reports and are often more likely to be utilised by policy makers, managers and politicians. Indeed, executive summaries are generally regarded as operationally significant conclusions drawn from more substantial and detailed documents. Our main argument is that the ES, and the study upon which it rests, reveals a particular narrow and problematic *way of thinking* about crime and its attempted management. More importantly, the study dovetails neatly with a number of other similar developmental approaches that invariably represent crime control as a techno-scientific project aimed at identifying those factorial 'precursors' likely to render some children 'at risk' of 'antisocial' behaviour. In our view, such articulations are integral to processes of government that seek to regulate and control the behaviours of supposedly aberrant and troublesome populations.

SHAKY CONCEPTUAL PILLARS

The two concepts central to the ES, and which therefore warrant some detailed attention here, are 'risk' and 'antisocial behaviour'. The ES refers broadly to risk as comprising those factors that may, at certain points in the developmental 'lifecycle', serve to predispose some children and young people to antisocial behaviour. The antecedents of risk are said to originate in the earliest years of a child's development, and this effectively sets the course of an individual's life. Thus, when it comes to the 'targeted' intervention of such children, 'agencies and organisations are encouraged to intervene *as early as possible in the life cycle* in order to prevent the emergence of antisocial problems'. 'Early intervention' and the minimisation of risk are therefore regarded as inseparable. Thus:

It is widely recognised that intervention during the earliest years of life are critical for the prevention of emotional and behavioural problems (for example, hyperactivity, attention regulation problems). Hence more broad based interventions (for example, home visiting programs) during infancy or early childhood, which attempt to prevent the development of problems before they emerge, may prove beneficial. Infants and young children whose socio-demographic and familial characteristics place them at increased risk of later developing

antisocial behaviour would particularly benefit from such preventative efforts (ATP 2002b:4, our emphasis).

According to the ES, 'antisocial behaviours' were most common among those aged 13-14 and 17-18 years. Such behaviours consisted of a significant proportion of petty offences, vandalism, cigarette smoking and alcohol abuse. Truancy and involvement in physical encounters also featured prominently among these groups. Despite such tendencies, the children and young people concerned appeared to avoid involvement in the criminal justice system: only 2-3 per cent were formally charged, only 1 per cent appeared in court, and less than 1 per cent had been convicted of crimes (ATP 2002b: 4).

In seeking to categorise levels of risk, the ES identifies three groups:

- 'low/non antisocial' (that is, those who exhibited low antisocial behaviour at all three chronological points);
- 'experimental' antisocials who had reported at least 3 acts of antisocial behaviour in one age category during the course of a year;
- 'persistent' antisocials who exhibited three or more acts at each chronological stage (ATP 2002b: 2).

Apparently, such children displayed 'higher levels of acting out, aggressive and hyperactive problems' and were more likely than others to 'display volatility and to experience difficulties in maintaining attention' (ATP 2002b: 3). Additionally, persistent antisocials were 'less cooperative', had 'poorer self control' and problematic relationships with parents, and were more likely to have 'friends who engaged in antisocial behaviours'.

Over time, persistent antisocials were likely to continue with their aberrant behaviours, while others seemed to settle into more acceptable and less 'dysfunctional' lifestyles. The most 'powerful' indicators of antisocial tendencies were exhibited in greater volatility, negativity, low persistence, aggressivity, acting out and hyperactivity. Persistent antisocials also tended to display less social confidence than their counterparts and more risk-taking, poor 'coping styles' and truancy during adolescence (ATP 2002b: 3). Persistent antisocials came from less 'cohesive' homes with a significant degree of 'alienation' between children and their parents. Such situations were also marked by 'low supervision, less warmth and love, and harsher discipline' than other households.

How precisely these conclusions were reached via several 'waves' of *mail* surveys is difficult to discern from the ES. One wonders, for instance, about the somewhat culturally loaded and cavalier way in which such information can be distilled from various preconceived categories. The study tends to cluster 'risk factors' in ways that create a 'profile' that is operationally convenient rather than conceptually

² The Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference took place on 13-14 February 2003. Four researchers involved with the Victorian study presented a paper entitled *Preventing Teenage Antisocial Behaviour: The Role of Individual Characteristics and the Family, School and Peer Environment*.

valid. The rush to *typologise* and to *classify* is exhibited in the fact that the ES fails to define its central concepts ('antisocial' and 'risk'), or to consider the relative merits of other explanatory frameworks. The tendency to pathologise children and young people irrespective of the problematic nature of the study's conceptual and theoretical foundations, and without any mention of other highly significant factors such as differential policing and state regulation, is a feature of many other developmental studies in this field of inquiry. (For a critique of such approaches see Bessant, Hil & Watts 2003; Hil & McMahon 2001.)

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Crucially, there is the nagging question of what actually constitutes antisocial behaviour – 'antisocial' according to whom and in which socio-cultural context? To describe acts that are legal and largely socially accepted in the adult world (like smoking and drinking alcohol) as antisocial merely by dint of the fact that the youngsters concerned are legally underage seems a little hypocritical. It is rather like a father beating a child for smoking while a cigarette hangs from the elder's lower lip. Indeed, it could be argued that such behaviours are in fact reflecting what goes on in the adult world where they are regarded as legitimate; or they could be viewed as 'rights of passage' tacitly and explicitly endorsed by the cultures of the adult world, and certainly *pro-social* in the socio-cultural context of the subject.

Moreover, by linking, say, smoking with antisocial behaviour and, by implication, criminal predisposition, the ES confuses criminality with what in fact – when taken from the subject's point of view – may be interpreted as cultural compliance and even conservatism. This suggests strongly that what is regarded as antisocial, deviant or aberrant may be more suitably considered as *contextualised difference*. Thus, while some may regard smoking and alcohol consumption as being at odds with the normative expectations of certain sections of the adult world, such behaviours may be viewed as acceptable and compliant from a young person's perspective. This is more than a mere relativistic assertion of human experience – it goes to the very core of how behaviours are understood and interpreted by those outside the immediate milieu of particular social groups.

SELECTIVITY

The study's tendency to cluster what turn out to be highly *selective* experiences that may be discrete, or which alter in content and meaning from one context to another, is of course replete with assumptions about the 'causes of crime'. Certainly, the Victorian project tends to individualise and pathologise issues that have their origins in complex social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. Moreover, the idea that risk factors can be clustered in a way that allows accurate prediction to occur has been largely rejected by even the most ardent proponents of factorial inquiry. Instead, developmentalists now prefer to talk about 'predispositions', 'indicators' or 'tendencies' at certain 'transition' points in the 'lifecycle'.

Precisely what nexus of factors, and how these might combine to trigger aberrant behaviour, is never made fully explicit. Additionally, the 'bigger picture' – those splintered and decontextualised factors in the background like poverty, socio-economic inequality, disadvantage, marginalisation, alienation, social exclusion, etc. – is reduced to an oblique and imprecise collage associated with something called 'the environment'. The historical contingencies, epistemological and discursive frameworks that establish what 'we know' about children, young people and 'antisocial behaviour' are, in analytical effect, relegated to the margins of irrelevance. Instead, measurement, collation and prediction become the conduits through which social realities are apparently understood.

FAMILY FACTORS

Although the Victorian study views 'individual child characteristics' as more important in terms of generating antisocial behaviour, family factors figure prominently in the explanatory account of persistent antisocials. As in many other developmental studies, most notably those conducted by the indefatigable doyen of longitudinal analysis, Professor David Farrington (1994), the family is seen as the crucible of crime causation. It is here that we find the most resonant cultural assumptions sweeping through what purports to be 'scientific' investigation. Families are defined as lacking 'cohesion', lacking in 'parental warmth or love', 'dysfunctional', conflictual, 'argumentative', and so forth.

The obvious question that arises here is: how do the investigators know all this? What assumptions about family life do *they* bring with them to the investigatory process? What is regarded as *not* constituting a conflict ridden or argumentative family? How precisely do family relationships translate into aberrant or antisocial behaviours? Additionally, there are important socio-cultural factors to consider here. For instance, do families from different cultural backgrounds relate in different ways to some sort of fictitious construction of the 'average' or 'normal' family? What sort of cultural yardsticks are being used to assess and

position these families? Might it also be worth asking which family does not at one time or another appear conflictual or argumentative, or lacking in cohesion? Why are such things regarded necessarily as indicators or precursors of a problematic or dysfunctional family? When does a family cross over into these unwanted regimes?

SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT

Similarly, if we look at what the ES has to say in terms of the importance of school adjustment, it is interesting to note the absence of any rigorous analysis of the social and cultural meanings associated with what might appear like dysfunctional pupil behaviour. Importantly, the ES notes that school attachment is the result of a two-way interactive process between the institution and individual, although the authors are far too quick to equate antisocial behaviour with 'difficult' and 'aggressive' attitudes and behaviours on the part of pupils. Again, the tendency to view the behaviours of some children against the more idealised (but never fully articulated) others, and to associate these with longer term antisocial behaviour, seems to ignore the contextual and cultural meanings associated with such behaviours and the often transitory and transformative nature of individual experience. Again, the tendency to fuse causative 'risk factors' with other 'factors' into a composite picture of the antisocial child raises far more questions than answers, and certainly turns the critical spotlight back onto the socio-cultural assumptions embedded in studies of this sort.

LANGUAGE, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

The conclusions found in *Patterns and Precursors of Adolescent Antisocial Behaviour* need to be viewed in conjunction with a host of other developmental studies that have been conducted over the past thirty years or so (see Hil & McMahon 2002 for a discussion of these studies). Indeed, the epistemological origins of these studies can be traced back to earlier works by child psychologists such as Donald Winnicott (1964) and John Bowlby (1953), all of whom saw the antecedents of delinquent behaviour as embedded in the formative years of early childhood. While there are significant differences between these theorists, they nonetheless share a highly individualistic view of human action that is grounded in personal traits or characteristics usually reflective of 'problematic' intra-familial relations.

This line of thinking, albeit grafted on to other social and community factors, can also be found in recent crime prevention literature such as the *Pathways to Prevention* (National Crime Prevention 1999) report in Australia. Central to these projects is not only the identification of a host of 'risk' factors but also detailed proposals for the implementation of a wide range of intervention strategies. Inevitably, the families at the centre of attention are drawn from the ranks of the urban and rural poor, made up

disproportionately of single parent households, black people and 'ethnic' families. Such studies, although grounded in the mystique of science (that is manifested in the attempted correlation of causative factors or 'triggers'), reveal a preoccupation with what the 'respectable classes' have historically viewed as potentially disruptive and troublesome populations (Foucault 1977, Pearson 1983). Significantly, current developmental discourses in the area of crime prevention tend to merge with wider concerns over the existence of an 'underclass' that is supposedly comprised mostly of persistent antisocial types.

The taxonomic narrative of potentially troublesome groups has long been a feature of scientific discourse in relation to crime and criminality. Earlier constitutional studies referred to the connection between certain body types and predisposition to crime, while more recent positivistic sociological studies have identified types according to social and economic indices (Muncie 1999). Such studies derive their categories and classifications from highly questionable discursive signifiers, often with little or no effort to qualify or define their meanings. Crime and criminality are rendered as *objectified* phenomena representative largely of what the poor and marginalised (the usual suspects!) get up to.

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The 'forensic' notion of risk (Lupton 1999) has proved particularly useful as a way of identifying and classifying antisocial and criminogenic types. It is now possible, in the current scientific vernacular, to talk of low, medium and high risk, and at the same time to avoid any reference to the contested nature of such social categories, as well as the complex processes of governmental regulation and control in the neo-liberal state. Instead, developmentalists tend to view their work as some sort of techno-scientific and morally neutral exercise in which typological order can be imposed upon the aberrant chaos that is criminal predisposition. Meanwhile, in the remote domains of 'background' or 'environmental' factors associated with these studies, there lurks those enduring and awkward questions about how social order is constructed and maintained, who benefits and who misses out, and why it is that some sections of society are actively governed far more rigorously than others? In such explanatory accounts, the reader is unlikely to come across any reference to poverty and the possibility of

redistributive justice, or for that matter, any allusion to social justice and human rights.

What the ES of the ATS reveals is confirmation of the scientism and individualism that has tended to underpin recent approaches to crime control. Despite the appearance of scientific neutrality, risk based, factorial approaches are underpinned by a host of questionable assumptions about human behaviour, agency and social order. Moreover, such assumptions, if accepted uncritically into the policy and practice of crime control (as they often are), will legitimate a massive injection of funds to various (questionable) intervention programs in Victoria.

Given the financial costs and possible intrusive nature of such interventions, it would be preferable to see the current ES and the report as the basis for open, critical and informed discussion about the meaning, nature, origins and distribution of crime and criminality. Most importantly, it is necessary to see crime and its attempted regulation and control as intimately connected to current institutional practices aimed at the maintenance of a certain sort of social order. Ultimately, crime and crime control are intimately bound up with questions of power and knowledge, and it is for this reason that the ES and other documents like it must be subject to close critical scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

As part of the Australian Temperament Project, the Victorian study is an important indicator of contemporary approaches to the social regulation of children, young people and their families. Perhaps the most revealing feature of the ES discussed in this article is the tendency to develop composite typologies without any rigorous analysis or appreciation of the various contexts in which 'antisocial' behaviours are constructed as such. Instead, by drawing on a range of questionable susceptibility factors, the ES lays the foundations for a program of radical intervention aimed at identifying the early signs of antisocial behaviour, and bringing about changes in family practices. (Interestingly, this dovetails with the latest political pronouncement on 'failing families'. ALP leader, Mark Latham, has once again ushered in the simple notion of 'parental responsibility' and the penalties that might arise when shortcomings are identified in this regard.)

There is absolutely nothing new or novel about the middle class culture on interventionism. The current rhetoric of 'risk management' and 'early intervention' now constitutes the stock-in-trade of most social and welfare organisations dealing with 'antisocial' behaviour. Indeed, 'early intervention' may refer to 'targeted' incursions into families before a child is actually born – a practice that has found its way into crime prevention practices and child protection work. Arguably, pre-natal early intervention may become even more commonplace as geneticists identify more and

more single and multiple genetic causes that supposedly predispose children to all manner of antisocial behaviour, including impulsivity, violence, aggressivity and so forth.

As noted, the problems in identifying 'antisocial behaviour' in children and young people are legion, and include a failure to take any account of the socially constructed nature of such terms as 'antisocial', the differential application of strategies and techniques of social regulation and control, or the socio-cultural assumptions that inform developmental approaches to crime prevention. Eager to place subjects in neat taxonomic categories, usually for operational purposes of 'early intervention', the Victorian study (despite its self assured aura of 'scientific method') ends up merely replicating the familiar errors of positivistic inquiry. ■

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Full details of the report/executive summary to which this article refers are:

- First report, December 2002, *Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour*, by Suzanne Vassallo, Diana Smart and Ann Sanson (Australian Institute of Family Studies), Inez Dussuyer and Bill McKendry (Crime Prevention Victoria), and The Australian Temperament Project Team, John Toumbourou, Margot Prior and Frank Oberklaid.
- First report: Executive Summary, October 2002.

A second report (October 2003) has since been published. Full details can be found on the AIFS website (www.aifs.org.au).