

Juvenile Delinquency and Psychopathic Behavior: About a Case in Abidjan

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Abstract

Violent and murderous juvenile delinquency born of the phenomenon of young people organized in gangs commonly called “microbes”, has become a real security problem for Ivorian society. It is in this context that this study has set itself the main objective of depicting the psychopathic behavior of a young “microbe” delinquent who has committed several violent crimes. It was a monographic study of the correlational-explanatory type that mobilized observation and semi-directive interviews for the production of data. The method of phenomenological analysis permits to detect traits of psychopathy in a 21-year-old youth through family history and accounts of criminal acts committed. The results of the study showed, on the one hand, a family dysfunction that gave the bed of behaviors such as the lack of empathy, the absence of remorse and the superficiality of the affects, thus translating a deficit on the level of the affective dimension. We also noted the presence of antisocial behavior such as living on the streets or in smoking rooms consuming and selling drugs. There were further implications such as theft, physical aggression and intentional homicide. According to the psychopathy literature, emotional insensitivity juxtaposed with behavior disorder was a primary combination of characteristics that help identify adolescents who exhibit psychopathic traits. Faced with this reality, this study pleads for the establishment of a special aid program to better control the deadly violence of these people.

Keywords

Youth, Delinquency, Psychopathic Behavior, Violence, Abidjan

1. Introduction

Violence is the main characteristic of insecurity; it is a societal phenomenon that is subject to many debates throughout the world [1]. In studies on the explanation of this phenomenon, particular emphasis is placed on the increasingly important and increased participation of young people in these violent situations [2]. Moreover, this delinquency among street children, once considered a phenomenon essentially centered on petty crime in developing countries [3] is now a hot topic in many countries. Indeed, the children and adolescents who roam the streets in most of the large urban areas of developing countries are no longer satisfied with petty theft for their survival, but are engaging in increasingly violent delinquent activities. In Africa, street children and youths, bearing the ever-increasing stigma of the life they lead and the drugs they take, are undoubtedly and progressively setting themselves against society [3]. The reality of this phenomenon is already visible in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where idle youth, called “Kuluna” terrorize the populations in Kinshasa, the capital. According to Mujinya [4], they use machetes, bottles, screwdrivers, and all sorts of sharp objects to hurt and destroy. This violent evolution of juvenile delinquency is also observed in Côte d’Ivoire. However, the various politico-military crises that this country has experienced have generated a phenomenon of young criminals organized in gangs commonly called “microbes”, which creates psychosis among the population [5]. These children and adolescents, armed with knives and sometimes firearms, use unprecedented violence to appropriate property, thus creating a stir among Ivorians [6]. According to Bah and Niamké [7], this juvenile crime in Abidjan is mostly the result of child soldiers who have been returned to civilian life without having been socialized and reintegrated. For several years now, rarely a week goes by without the media reporting on an event involving violence committed by one or more young people against a peer or an adult.

Faced with this unparalleled violence and murderous aggression, we wondered if there were individuals with psychopathic tendencies among these “microbes”. According to Khiel and Hoffman’s [8] study, the prevalence rate of psychopathy in the general population would be more or less 1%. Yet, psychopathic offenders are responsible for a significant proportion of violent crime in society, approximately 73%. This monographic study, which is presented here, mainly aims at depicting the psychopathic behavior of a young “*microbe*” delinquent who had committed several violent crimes. To carry out this scientific reflection, we asked ourselves what is the socio-demographic profile of the participating actor? How does his criminal trajectory as a “microbe” look like? What is his criminal etiology and his psychological state?

2. Methodology

This correlational-explanatory monographic study was made possible through a project for the resocialization and reintegration of young people in conflict with

the law, initiated by the Ivorian government for three months (May to July 2021).

The study participant was identified in a group of 270 young people in conflict with the law commonly referred to as “microbes” during their socialization in M’bahiakro in the central Ivory Coast. The study participant was 21 years old and he came on his own for the different interview sessions, four times within two weeks.

The subject was subjected to the following research protocol:

- A semi-structured interview to study the socio-individual data (family relations, school career), psycho-criminological (investigation of the acts), psychopathological (investigation of the personality).
- Direct observation to know the psychopathological disorders (post-traumatic stress disorder, relations with the supervisors and peers).

Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews and direct observation. The tools used were the observation grid and the interview guide. This work being a monographic study, we opted for the qualitative analysis method.

Thus, the method of analysis retained is the phenomenological approach which permits to detect the traits of psychopathy through the family history and the accounts of the criminal acts committed.

Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality of responses were observed during data collection.

3. Results

The results of the study revolve around the socio-individual profile, the criminal trajectory, and the criminal etiopathy of the participant before and after the criminal acts committed. For ethical considerations, the study participant is referred to by the acronym BAMO.

3.1. Socio-Family Profile and Criminal Trajectory

Born on March 3, 1998, in Abobo (a district of Abidjan), BAMO was 21 years old at the time of the study. Muslim, he comes from a polygamous family. He was the second born child out of a total of six on his mother’s side. BAMO said that he left school in year 6 of primary school (CM2). The reasons for dropping out of school were personal but also related to the economic difficulties of his parents. BAMO told us that from the age of 12, he became a drug dealer and as a result, he no longer found any interest to go to school, where he often got into fights with the students.

At the family level, the parental relationship was conflictual and his mother was in charge of most of the family responsibilities. There was also a conflictual atmosphere amid the family members (father, brother and sisters). To this end, he explained himself in these terms: “*Since childhood I have been neglected. My mum was always away for her business and I often stayed alone with the other children in the yard. It was always fighting*”. This hostile family atmosphere led BAMO to go live on the streets and mostly frequent smokehouses. He further

indicated that, during the post-electoral crisis of 2010, he was a member of a group of combatants from the Samanqué district in the Abobo commune in Abidjan. He says he helped a group of armed fighters based in Abobo without missing (Abidjan). A drug dealer since the age of 12 and in support of 2010 post-election crisis, he regularly sold and used cocaine, cannabis, and Rivotrine and Tramadol tablets. He also said he had a six-month stay at the Abidjan Prison and Correctional Facility (MACA) following a police arrest in January 2013 in the smoking room where he got his supplies.

Sexually, he claimed to have had his first sexual intercourse in 2014 at the age of 16 and subsequently had regular recourse to sex workers.

In addition, BAMO said that in October 2013 he joined a group of “microbes” out of curiosity.

His initiation into criminal activities within the gang took place one evening on the last Friday of October 2013, he said. According to him, he will subsequently participate in the assassination of six people, three of them on his own initiative.

3.2. Accounts of Criminal Confessions

3.2.1. First Experience of Stabbing

For his first experience of stabbing, BAMO stabs a passerby in Angré, a district of the Commune of Cocody after having taken from him with his first “microbe” friends, his mobile phone and his wallet containing the sum of 150,000 FCFA.

He explains the scene in these terms: *“I was selling drugs, cannabis for my godfather and that day, my stock was quickly finished. That day, my new friends came to find me in the neighborhood. When I finished with my sponsor, my friends and I went to Angré in Cocody. We were walking around the neighborhoods and suddenly, we came across a gentleman who passed us. We said well, we have to attack it. We turned around to block it with a knife. We searched him and took an iPhone mobile phone and his “bedou”. There were 150,000 in it. We wanted to let him go but the dose was too much in our eyes. I took my friend’s three-star knife to poke four times in his thigh and we fled. Arrived in Abobo, we shared the money and everyone took their “guy”. That day, I took real courage to sting the gentleman.”*

3.2.2. Second Knife Attack Experience

For his second stabbing experience, BAMO stabs a young girl and snatches her mobile phone and purse during a visit to the Abidjan ZOO with his other “microbe” friends.

He explains the scene in these terms: *“One Sunday, I had nothing to do, I took a knife and I went to the “ghetto” to find three of my friends. We said we’re going to the ZOO. When we arrived, we got you a well-dressed young girl with her cell phone iPhone. We followed him. We wanted to get to a corner where you can take your phone. For a moment, my friends there were distracted. I followed the girl until we got out of the ZOO. We did 100 meters like that and suddenly*

she knew I was following her. So I pretended to urinate. The girl kept walking. I hurried over to her and pretended to chat with her. As I walked, I told the girl that I was thirsty. She gave me 500 francs to buy water. Then we got to a corner where I could attack him. Quickly I overpowered the girl and jabbed her thigh with my knife. I quickly took his phone, and his bag and left behind the military hospital in a “gloss glos” to take off my clothes and carry the other one that was in my backpack. Afterwards, I came back to the zoo to find my friends. They asked me where I had left. I told them that the noise that happened there was me. There is one who said, let’s leave here and we left.”

3.2.3. Third Stabbing Experience

For his third stabbing experience, BAMO and his other “microbe” friends rob a stranger by stabbing him several times on the way back from his ZOO package.

He explains the scene in these terms: *“As we left the ZOO, we spotted a well-dressed gentleman. We said, he has the ‘djêhê’, that is to say money. We followed him and we saw him taking a ‘gbâka’ (bus) of Abobo. We got into the bus to follow him. When we saw him get off at his stop, we too got off to follow him to a place to overpower him with our knives. I gave the first knife. He wanted to defend himself. A friend of mine got scared and ran away. Me and the others continued to poke him in the arm and stomach. He fell and we took everything on him. Either way, he’s going to die.”*

3.2.4. Fourth Stabbing Experience

For his fourth experience of stabbing, BAMO stabbed a passer-by in a night market in the district of Abobo to take his mobile phone and his wallet.

He explains it in these terms: *“One Saturday evening, alone, I went to the PK18 district in Abobo. I had 3500 francs on me and I wanted to have fun. I entered a ‘ghetto’. I bought a can of alcohol ‘Voddys’, tablets, and cannabis drugs. I drank a little and put the tablets in the rest. I let it sit to mix. After when I finished smoking the drug and drinking my mixture, I went to the night market. I saw a gentleman and his girlfriend. I grabbed the gentleman’s belt from behind his panties. At the same time his girlfriend fled. I said to him: ‘give everything!’. He saw my knife but he wanted to defend himself. I picked him in his ribs. He had become weak so I took his Samsung cell phone and his ‘bedou’. Afterward, I saw 90,000 francs in it. He continued to resist grabbing me. So I picked him three times in the stomach. He screamed and fell. I fled to return to a neighborhood. Arrived in front of a white mosque, I took a taxi to go to the station. There I took another to go to the neighbourhood.”*

3.2.5. Fifth Stabbing Experience

For his fifth experience of stabbing, BAMO stabbed a young girl at a place in the crossing of the rails in the commune of Abobo to take her mobile phone and her handbag.

He explained it in these terms: *“I often went on the ground on Saturdays when people like to go out with the agent, the gold chains and all that. One eve-*

ning I went behind rail. I saw a well-dressed girl with a very expensive iPhone cell phone. I followed her slowly. Arrived in a corner on the rails where we were two, I told him to give me everything. She wanted to hesitate so I pricked her in the stomach and on the thigh. She fell with a lot of blood. I quickly took his phone and his bag. People started asking me to chase. I went back to the bush to hide in a big hole. Going down the hole, I fell and the phone I picked up broke.”

3.3. Delinquency Factors and Post-Crime Psychological State

3.3.1. Delinquency Factors

Asked about the motivations for his criminal acts, BAMO explained himself in these terms: *“I like valuable cell phones. When I go and you don’t want to give, I sting you at the same time. I also like good things. We have nothing so we decided to take it with force. This is why we often attack and kill. Often, when we attack, we do not see inside. We always take drugs first.”*

3.3.2. Post-Crime Psychological State

BAMO’s reason for consultation was related to a sleep disorder associated with a perception disorder. He was excluded from the government project for the resocialization of children in conflict with the law. In the aftermath of drug withdrawal at the resocialization center, BAMO says he suffered from insomnia and impaired perception. He hardly slept and saw the scenes of aggression as well as the people killed in the form of flashbacks. It was therefore this situation of insomnia and the reliving of the scenes of aggression and killings that led him to the psychological care team. The psychiatric examination carried out by the team’s psychiatrist revealed the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Regarding his psychological state after the criminal acts committed, BAMO reports that he does not feel anything in addition to his regular drug use. He related it in these terms: *“I became a microbe myself. Afterwards, our leader saw my courage. I do this to have the money to live. It means nothing to me when afterwards I attack. Then we go to the smoking room to take our dose to leave again.”*

4. Discussion

In view of the results of the monographic study and in accordance with the research objective, it is important to put forward some elements for discussion and explanation by comparing them with those found in the literature.

The socio-individual data concerning the family history of BAMO, we observe the existence of conflicting interpersonal behaviors and a lack of attachment with the family.

BAMO therefore evolved within a hostile family atmosphere, a source of emotional deficit. Family failure as a source of the emergence of delinquency and violence among adolescents has already been underlined by certain authors who affirmed that any family education lacking clear discipline or confronted with

social or material difficulties can be a source of delinquency, even of violence [9] [10].

This aspect of our study is also in line with the results of the Crizoa study published in 2019. According to its results, the criminal delinquency of “microbes” is explained by the fact that in families tormented by poverty and unemployment, there is poor supervision of children. The latter, generally left to fend for themselves in most cases, join the neighborhood criminal gangs likely to enable them to meet the needs of money and food, which their parents cannot provide [6].

It appears that BAMO often lived on the street or in smoking rooms and thus became a regular drug dealer and user at a young age. It is also noted in the latter an unbridled sexual behavior and a stay of six months in prison. The analysis of the content of the story also underlines that BAMO engaged in criminal acts of theft, physical aggression and intentional homicide of others through an instrument. All of these behaviors identified at BAMO fall within the general framework of antisocial behavior. Still speaking of family failure, it is often cited as a factor favoring the emergence of a chronic and violent delinquent trajectory in adolescents. Some authors also argued that low socioeconomic status could also be a risk factor in the development of antisocial behavior. It appears that coming from families of lower social classes could pose an increased risk for the development of a chronic and violent criminal trajectory [11].

Moreover, our respondent was out of school at a very early age, which is where Bauer and Raufer [12] noted that the actors of urban aggression and violence are always young males between 15 and 25 years old, whose high levels of testosterone, due to puberty, explained a behavior that is all the more violent because it is asocial, *i.e.*, not channeled by education or school. To add to this, Nasıroğlu and Semerci [13] noted that crime and violence made it difficult for children to stay in the educational system and continue their schooling. It was easier for children who encountered difficulties in continuing their education to shift their focus to violence and criminal or quasi-criminal behavior.

Concerning the psychocriminological data, the criminal acts of BAMO, shows on the one hand, that most often the act was preceded by the use of psychoactive substances (alcohol, drugs and tablets).

This same ritual of consumption of these psychoactives, was on the other hand, observed after the execution of these criminal acts. The supposed role of psychoactive substances in the criminal violence committed by “microbes” has already been highlighted in several studies. This work further shows that smoking rooms, where “microbes” get their drug supplies, are at the root of the ultra-violent behaviors of young offenders by exacerbating psychopathological and social problems in them [6] [14].

This aspect of our work is supported by a recent study by Glowacz and Born [15] who argued that the shift from drug use to delinquency occurred particularly when money from dealing not only funded personal consumption, but in-

creased living standards. The money then became more important than the drugs and determined a trajectory that could lead to very serious acts. Thus, young people would be more inclined than adults to resort to intoxication with psychotropic products in order, among other things, to give themselves the courage to commit acts of delinquency [16].

On the other hand, BAMO said that he voluntarily joined a group of “microbes” and that through his courage, he became its leader. This can be explained by the fact that adolescents are engaged in mixed social networks, most often of the same age or older and rarely younger, probably supported by a search for similarity, needs for relationships of reciprocity and identification that consolidated their sense of belonging. In his quest, he would meet delinquent peers whose norms and values he could adopt. The reduction of cognitive dissonance would gradually lead him to align his values with his actions and thus open the door to a true delinquency spiral [15]. Once in this spiral, they commit assaults on physical persons. These are generally the work of gangs of young delinquents (sometimes drugged) who do not hesitate to use their knives to force their victims to give them what they demand [17].

Regarding his psychological state after the criminal acts committed, our respondent told us that he had no remorse after these acts of deadly violence. This aspect of our results highlights higher risk-taking under the background of courage during these criminal activities and a lack of empathy towards its victims. In this regard, Book argued that, like adults, children with psychopathic traits show little remorse for negative actions they take toward others, show little empathy toward others, and are more likely to be aggressive [18].

Moreover, in literature data, aggressive behavior is correlated with strong novelty seeking and associated with low damage avoidance, dependence on rewards and persistence in children, these elements are predictive of antisocial behavior in adolescents and young adults [19].

The synthesis of personality traits identified in BAMO, highlighted the presence of difficult interpersonal behaviors and a lack of attachment with the family which highlight an affective deficit. This synthesis also identified our respondent’s antisocial behavior, an absence of remorse after his criminal violence and traits of emotional insensitivity. This aspect of our study is supported by the results of several studies which argued that psychopathic traits would manifest more strongly as a deficit in the affective dimension, which includes lack of empathy, absence of remorse and superficiality affects. The coexistence of this deficit with the characteristics of the conduct disorder (set of behaviors, repetitive and persistent, in which the fundamental rights of others or social norms and rules (DSM-V) are violated), would constitute the best predictor of the emergence of psychopathic traits compared to the mere presence of antisocial behaviors during childhood [20] [21].

To reinforce Saint-Martin and Chabrol [22] concluded in their study that only alcohol and cannabis use and psychological toughness, a psychopathic personal-

ity trait, influenced antisocial behavior. Addressing the psychopathic process, Meloy [23] underlines that it is perpetuated by the incapacity to overcome a state of displeasure, to repress an unpleasant affect and what leads the subject to a diffuse anger experience because he cannot refer, because of the poverty of his identifications, to soothing experiences and, therefore, to empathy. In other words, the subject can oscillate between an affective aggressiveness which brings into play an unspeakable emotion by its proximity to the fear of psychotic invasion and a predatory aggressiveness, apparently devoid of emotion.

Moreover, the violent act can be understood as a sudden perception of an appalling inner emptiness, a search for explosive control of limits, a refusal of the unbearable, of narcissistic incompleteness [24], where the subject abruptly falls back to flee from anything that might remind him of an abandoned and mortifying experience (breakdowns, deficiencies, family failures, etc.). Everything that can only banish the emotion of the act but whose fright can be sensed when the relationship tries to tame this strange experience.

Finally, with Jeammet [25], the act of acting out most often has a dimension of intrusion and violence. It then intervenes as a response to a situation experienced as a form of relational closeness due to the emotions felt by the one who experiences them as an intrusion by the one who provokes them. The violent act brutally establishes a process of separation and differentiation with the other. It restores a space of one's own; an identity threatened for a moment by the link and the emotions that it triggers, at the same time as it avoids solitude and affirms a presence that is foreign to the self without any possible confusion. An acted violence usually follows the fear of an undergone violence, real or imaginary, but which makes the ego live a feeling of dispossession of itself.

By way of conclusion, we see that this monographic study is well understood in the light of the systemic approach. According to Elkaim [26], the systemic method is indeed distinguished from other methods by its way of understanding human relations. It allowed us to understand that the individual is influenced both by his intentions, those of others, and those of the possibilities of the environment and/or the system.

5. Conclusions

From the analysis of the family history and the story of the criminal acts committed by a young delinquent belonging to a gang of "microbes", we have identified, on the one hand, a family dysfunction which has paved the way for certain behaviors such as lack of empathy, the absence of remorse and the superficiality of the affects thus reflecting a deficit at the level of the affective dimension. On the other hand, we noted the presence of antisocial behaviors such as living on the street or in smoking rooms with the consumption and sale of drugs. The results were, therefore, theft, physical assault and intentional homicide. From this analysis it appears that BAMO had a personality marked by an affective deficit and antisocial behavior. It is in this that the literature on psychopathy tells us

that emotional insensitivity juxtaposed with adolescent conduct disorder seems to constitute psychopathic traits as observed in BAMO.

Thus, among these young criminals organized in gangs commonly called “microbes” some have real psychopathological problems which would explain the atrocity of their attacks. This study therefore pleads for the implementation of a special assistance program to better control the murderous violence of the latter, where the care would be holistic. The actions will be carried out by a multidisciplinary team whose concern for mental health will not be reduced to the detection of individual pathology, but which will force to think in situation the articulations between education, justice and psychiatry. Finally, this program will also work to prevent violence among children, adolescents and young people since it is a pernicious circle.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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