**‘Mean Girls’ to Mass Sociogenic Illnesses: The Criminal Ecology of Female Adolescents**

Written by Michael Arntfield, August 23, 2013

Last week a total of twelve teenaged girls in Le Roy, New York seemed to have been spontaneously “cured” of an unknown and seemingly contagious illness that seized hold of the town of just over 7000 inhabitants. In the otherwise unheard-of farming community where one in twenty lives below the poverty line, the mystery illness quickly led to involuntary twitches, spasms, convulsions, and other symptoms amongst its young women that seemed to approximate Tourette’s Syndrome, as well as other forms of psycho-motor agitation. As each patient’s symptoms grew progressively and aggressively worse for no apparent medical reason, an underlying cause proved all the more elusive:

As each girl began to worsen, the total number of cases seemed to snowball as her peers, neighbors, and classmates began to adopt the same behaviors until such time as it was thought—mostly by their parents—that there was some kind of isolated epidemic emerging. Theories as to its etiology ranged from water contamination stemming from a chemical spill as far back as the 1970s, to generalized environmental pollution, to biological warfare, to some sort of pervasive autoimmune or streptococcal illness that was the genesis of a global pandemic. It was ultimately determined, however, that each patient was succumbing with progressively rapid onset to what is known in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition (DSM IV)—the multigenerational Bible of psychopathology—as conversion disorder. As the diagnosis suggests, “conversion” refers to the physiological manifestation of existing mental and psychological disorders in a patient, or the mental being converted into the physical. Examples frequently include but are not limited to fainting spells, catatonia, and, like in this latest case, ticks, spasms, and involuntary utterances. The fact that this outbreak occurred in a small and somewhat socially isolated town, where delineating one’s identity as a teen or young adult—an already daunting task riddled with existentialist angst—is exacerbated by an increasing awareness of one’s apparent irrelevance in world, should therefore not be surprising. Keep in mind that small towns and rural and agrarian centers remain the locales where the incidence of suicide amongst all age groups, for some of these same reasons, remains statistically most prevalent. The fact that all of these cases presented as being contemporaneous additionally points to larger social issues not only in Le Roy, but across the West generally. I’m going to suggest here that some additional parallels can therefore be drawn between this case and the group dynamics and criminal ecology of anti-social female cliques where conversion disorder has historically manifested itself in the form of much more virulent (socially speaking) conduct that has equally significant consequences.

Conversion disorder, like any psychological setback, is not contagious in the conventional cellular, or biological sense. This latest case study is however emblematic of conversion disorder fitting within the rubric of the subconsciously contagious phenomenon known as a Mass Sociogenic Illness (MSI). Typically occurring in an identifiable social group over a quantifiable timeline and not otherwise accounted for by some other physiological variable, common psycho-somatic symptoms of an MSI are capable of being transmitted by peer pressure and mimesis rather than tradition routes of infection. In isolated communities—small agrarian towns like Le Roy, boarding schools, encampments, prison populations et al—one person’s stress-induced histrionics and attention-seeking tactics become another’s muse: their pre-emptive validation for indulging in abnormal and anti-social behavior, or to adopt similar traits as one of either ensuring belonging or mitigating, through this same conversion process, their own existing psychological issues.

The fact that both the documented cases of conversion-related disorders and occurrences of MSI are disproportionately represented by young female patients according to the relevant literature speaks to a number of issues faced by teen girls not only today, but for centuries. These range from the stresses of acceptance and accompanying body image and self-worth issues, to the unique group dynamics of female social circles, including the fact that females during their formative years tend to be highly ideological and territorial as compared to males; their often clinging to the modalities of social tribalism and even what might be described as a doctrine of isolationism, with any alliances beyond the immediate group typically being secretive in nature. Artistically dubious but still culturally relevant films such as Heathers (1989) andMean Girls (2004) underscore the powerful psychological influence that high school female cliques ultimately have on individuality and autonomy with startling clinical accuracy. Aside from these filmic references and their narrative arcs intersecting with the current fiasco and ensuing moral panic in Le Roy, there are in fact more infamous incidents in the annals of criminal justice that likely warrant re-examination through the lens of the MSI phenomenon as we presently understand it.

Located a little over 400 miles from Le Roy (which astoundingly also happens to be home to the Jell-O Museum) is the equally austere and sequestered town of Salem, Massachusetts which should certainly ring a bell in the context of epidemics encompassing manic and allegedly contagious misbehavior by young women. Beginning in 1692 (though actually “symptoms” were first documented in 1691) inexplicable hysterics, spasms, and speaking with strange twitches and in bizarre tongues was thought to be the work of “the Devil’s hand.”  While credible theories suggest that some of the preliminary 1691 cases were biological and environmental in origin, stemming from toxins spread by a rare fungus found in the surrounding forests, what likely began as a form of conversion disrorder followed by an MSI eventually led local puritans to believe that Satanic possessions and witchcraft (the proverbial chemical spill of the day I suppose) had descended on to their small God fearing town. In the end, over 185 citizens were named as witches or witch conspirators, and of those condemned, 19 were executed by either hanging or crushing. One man, said to be covering for and thus enabling the evil designs of at least one of the young women, also died during the use of experimental “interrogation” techniques, while many of the other 100 or so who spent years languishing in prison also died there. Historians and gothic criminologists point to the fact that the emergence of the “symptoms” of witchcraft and demonic control emerged during female bonding rituals and seemed to be most prevalent when the girls were either in groups or subsumed in the public spectacle of the open courtroom, where common sense and due process could both be readily sublimated by the pageantry of good theatre. While some were no doubt fakers, liars, and charlatans looking to have their rivals persecuted, or simply to get in on the high stakes action, the Salem witch scare remains a watershed of collective mimesis amongst adolescent females in a criminal context.

Consider then the events that led to another watershed panic in Canada on the night of November 14, 1997. That night, a cabal of 6 psychopathic teen girls known in the media as “The Shoreline Six”—their true identities protected under the legislation of what was then the Young Offender’s Act—lured fourteen-year-old Reena Virk to an area near the Craigflower Bridge on Vancouver Island under the auspice of sharing some beer and cigarettes. Their precise motive for luring the shy and ostracized Virk there, or for what happened next, has never been fully understood but has been the subject of great debate, speculation, and innuendo. After swarming Virk and punching and stomping her repeatedly, she was tortured with lit cigarettes while attempts were actually made to set her on fire. Eventually a 15-year-old named Kelly Ellard and a male hanger-on named Warren Glowatski held Virk under the shallow water at ebb tide until she drowned—her remains not being discovered for nearly another two weeks. The case, solemnized in the Globe & Mail as a “national tragedy,” proved cause for an unprecedented Canadian moral panic and national discourse about social decay and mob violence amongst teenaged girls. Both Ellard and Glowatski were ultimately sentenced the life in prison for first degree murder, the former having her case make it all the way up to the Supreme Court, and the latter having already been paroled as of 2010.

While Virk’s case has been the focus of much debate by academics, activists, artists, and journalists, it is important to note that during this same period (1988 to 1998 to be exact) Statistics Canada identified adolescent females as being the fastest growing violent crime group in Canada. With records confirming an overall increase of 127% over the decade, as compared to an increase of 65% amongst their male counterparts within the same age range, and compared to an increase of just 6% amongst all offenders over the age of 18, questions as to why abounded. As of 2008, the song remains the same. That year, Statistics Canada confirmed that aggregate data collected from law enforcement across the country by its subsidiary Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS) showed that adolescents arrested and charged with murder was at its highest point since current record keeping practices in this category began in 1961. More significantly, as adolescent female offenders arrested and charged with violent crimes continues to climb, teen girls as of 2009 were found to outnumber adult females in most crime categories by nearly 300% on average. While crime statistics should always been taken with a grain of salt for a disparity of reasons, most of which are timeworn and too daunting to try and index here, they are nonetheless representative, in a multidisciplinary context, of broader social trends (aka the Chicago School model of criminology) that bring us back once again to Le Roy, New York last week.

MSI events are still only half-understood. While there is some evidence that there may be an evolutionary advantage to adopt some MSI traits in cases of extreme hardship or environmental volatility, and that all modern Western customs and etiquette may have at some point been transmitted as “normal” conduct through mass social mimesis, the acute, systemic adoption of psychopathological and anti-social behaviors in the age of the flash mob is frightening to say the least. That said, an MSI event—whether manifested as ticks, demonic fugue states, or sadistic beatings and burnings—is not the work of a mob per se. The research done on mob dynamics stresses the power of the mob to absorb individuals as part of an amorphous collective where the group assumes a composite personality and will to power, and where the individual is then ultimately anonymized. MSI events, however, are distinctly about retaining the sovereignty and celebrity of the individual—demarcating and distinguishing oneself as being as independently cool or daring as their peers. This performative process is at the heart of any model of criminal ecology where all individuals coexist independently but symbiotically with their environment and other individuals, and is the part of the reason why the Chicago School model (and by extension the Social Learning model) needs to be understood as the new criminology. It is a binary school of criminology not mired by the junk science of crime stats, but by a holistic and multi-disciplinary understanding of crime not only as a thing but as a complex cultural process that reflects both social strain and rational free will at once. From Mean Girls to MSI events, rural whackos to witches, all of these events are connected as part of a larger phenomenon that transcends time and space, and is much bigger than the town of Le Roy and its viral rise to Internet notoriety.

**SOURCE:** Arntfield, Michael. “Mean Girls to Mass Sociogenic Illnesses: The Criminal Ecology of Female Adolescents.” Online. London, (ON): *MichaelArntfield.com* 23 August 2012. Web. 04 Feb 2016.