

## The Psychology of Criminal Mind

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### Abstract

Crime has been defined as an act that attracts punishment for an offence against the community that leads to consequences that are harmful to the community at large or one or more people within it. It involves the violation of moral rules. When people commit crimes it might first appear that insanity may be the cause behind such acts but when trying to understand the psychology of the criminal, it seems that the crime makes a lot of sense for them as they do it because of their faulty thinking style. There are many different explanations as to why individuals commit crime. Knowing the psychology or the psychological processes helps in stepping into the shoes of the suspect before reaching the correct verdict. The psychological theories behind the criminal mind have been described in detail. The familial, social, and psychological risk factors have also been discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Crime, thinking style, criminal mind, psychological processes.

### Introduction

Crime has been defined as an act that attracts punishment for an offence against the community (Blackburn, 1993). Committing a crime leads to consequences that are harmful to the community at large or one or more people within it. These consequences can be either trivial or severe. It involves the violation of moral rules. What is considered as a crime varies in different societies. 'The core of criminal law is the same, but the border moves' (Feldman, 1993; p.4). Murder, rape and theft are considered crimes almost everywhere whereas other sorts of criminal acts are defined by the societies in which they are committed. According to the legal tradition in the UK, a crime has not been committed unless the person is found guilty for committing it (actus reus) and the act has been carried out voluntarily with an intent. Thus, acts that have not been chosen by the individual are not crimes. If the individual is not aware about the legality of the act then there cannot be a 'guilty mind'. The claim that this essay tries to make is as follows: When people commit crimes it might first appear that insanity may be the cause behind such acts but when trying to understand the psychology of the criminal, it seems that the crime makes a lot of sense for them as they do it because of their faulty thinking style.

According to the M'Naghten rule, a person may be regarded as innocent when the crime is committed due to insanity or the diseased mind of the person committing it which prevented him from realising his fault. In fact, it is very difficult to answer the question as to why a crime is committed. There are many different explanations as to why individuals commit crime. One of the main explanations is based on psychological theories, which focus on the association among intelligence, personality, learning, and criminal behavior.

Knowing the psychology or the psychological processes that contribute to an offense is as important, as the written laws, or their interpretation. It helps in stepping into the shoes of the suspect before reaching the correct verdict. For example, in cases of homicide; whether or not there was premeditation or intent determines whether

someone can be charged for committing murder or homicide. This is just a simple example of the significant role that the psychological state of an individual plays in determining punishment. Understanding the psychology of a criminal is difficult because most theories rest on hypothesis, rather than factual data which cannot be proved. Research today explores a variety of physical factors such as; altered levels of serotonin, alterations in the frontal lobe, ADD (Attention Deficit Disorders), high testosterone levels combined with low serotonin levels, effect of various self-induced drugs, trauma and accidents, effect of war trauma, stressful events in natural disasters like post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive problems and the like.

Faulty thinking style has been regarded as one of the major factor contributing to criminal behavior. But is it possible to help offenders change their thinking and behavior by focusing on their thinking patterns? For centuries it has been believed that crimes are committed due to sociological, psychological or biological factors over which they have little or no control. Some sociologists believe that crime is an adaptive response to conditions that lead to poverty and deprive people of opportunity and hope. Some attribute crimes to misplaced values in society that causes alienation. Psychologists regard the role of early experience in the family as causative of crimes. Crimes have also been regarded as a bio-psychosocial phenomenon.

In 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cited eleven risk factors as causing crimes. Eight were family risk factors, six, community risk factors and six peer/ social risk factors. If poverty causes crime, then one might have expected a surge in crime during the severe economic recession that lasted from 2008 to 2011. Crime statistics strongly suggest that bad times do not necessarily make bad people but bad character does (Cohen, 2011; p A13). In the late nineteenth century, Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician stated that some individuals are born criminals. Dr. Adrian Raine in his book, "The Anatomy of Violence" stated that criminals do have broken brains that are different from the rest of us. He reported that damage to the prefrontal cortex can lead to antisocial and aggressive behavior.

Studies of adopted children have provided evidence of heritability of criminality. Mednick et al. (1984) found that adopted children of criminal biological parents were more likely to be criminals than adopted children of non-criminal biological parents. Thus, the theories about potential causes of crime are wide-ranging. If we want to understand criminality with an open mind, it is important to understand as to why people commit crimes. It is important to focus on the criminal himself, and his faulty thinking patterns.

It is usually presumed that criminals are prone to thinking errors that lead to crimes. Thinking errors can be categorized as: the lack of concept of injury to others, claiming to be a victim and blaming others when held accountable, an ability to shut off conscience, an extreme sense of entitlement, a sense of uniqueness, the lack of a concept of obligation, an ability to shut off fear. The criminal thinks that, "Life is a one-way street- my way". A glimpse of these thinking errors can be seen in a case study given below:

**Case-A**

Mr. A was in his early twenties when he and a friend spotted an elderly gentleman walking out of a store. He wanted to have something to do. Feeling bored, he and his buddy accosted this man and repeatedly struck him with a baseball bat. The victim died of multiple blunt impacts to his head. Mr. A's parents separated when he was in middle school. He and his five siblings went to live with their mother. She was unstable and had difficulty supervising her children. He was a below average student till eighth grade. None of the other children had a criminal record. As a child his behaviour was uncaring toward his younger brother. On asking to go and find a job, he said that he didn't need one. He said that he could go out there and steal if he needed something. He insisted upon doing things on his own terms and tuned out anyone who disagreed with him. Rather than being defensive about his temper, he seemed proud of it. He said that a lot of people say that I have a conscience. If I see something I want, "I can steal without getting caught". Although he gave inconsistent accounts about the homicide, he tried blaming it on a friend.

Rarely do criminals think about the impact of their behaviour as was the case with Mr. A who didn't know anything about the gentleman who was walking out of a store. If we try and understand the criminal mind, his purpose is to achieve a sense of sheer power, control and excitement. Mr. A's victim was a stranger. His sole motive was to get a charge out of knocking him down, subduing him and then robbing him. Criminals have a tattered threadbare conscience. They can recognise that other people have a conscience but are undeterred and proud that this was something they did not have to reckon with. They enjoy a sense of enlightenment. This can be seen in Mr. A's statement, "If I see something I want, I just take it."

Criminals do not justify their crimes before committing them. There is excitement in every phase of crime. Even when the criminal is caught, the excitement does not end. The driving force of his personality is a desire to appear unique in front of others. He refuses to subordinate himself for a very long time to anyone. Criminals do not have a sense of obligation. According to them, to be obliged means that a person is powerless. They frequently say they have nothing to do and complain of boredom. As can be seen in the above case study, Mr. A had no close friendship, he rejected his family, had no career aspirations and was loyal to no one. They are aware of the consequences of their crime but they have a capacity to eliminate these risks from their thinking. For a criminal, fear is a dirty word. It is incompatible with his self-image. Having set his mind on a course of action, he is not shaken.

Delinquency has often been linked to faulty parenting. Parents do not communicate properly, fail to provide nurturance and support, do not institute appropriate discipline, do not monitor their children efficiently, are rejecting, abusive and are mostly inconsistent in their treatment of their children. Psychologist David Cohen (1999) in his book, "Stranger in the Nest", notes that "a strong inborn potential can negate parental influence" (p 4, 7). Thus parents have much less influence on a child's psychological development than is commonly supposed. Each child is born with a different temperament. One cannot change one's child basic temperament but the way they respond to it can be changed (Carey, 1997, p xxi). Neglect and abuse are examples of bad parenting that contributes to criminal conduct. A disturbed family system can give rise to few cases of antisocial behaviour but there is yet no convincing evidence from treating entire families that the disturbed system is a cause

of a child's expanding patterns of delinquent activity. The juvenile is usually unconcerned about the distress that he imposes on his parents.

Young offenders usually claim that they committed a crime because of their friends. They believe that they are just like any other teenager. Numerous researchers believe that a delinquent peer is a strong risk factor for committing crime. During the process of socialization, kids learn about co-operation and competition. Whereas responsible children can discover opportunities for fun, the delinquent child experiences boredom. He seeks immediate recognition but does not want to do what is necessary for him. A criminal has no remorse for crime. His only regret being that he was caught and he resolves to avoid being apprehended in the future.

Criminals usually have a strong sex drive. It is not the biological urge but an excitement of making a conquest that provides the impetus for sexual activity. As a child the criminal learns that sex is one way of gaining that power. He does not conceive of his partner as a person. Rather, he views the partner as a sexual object. The charge that he gets from seducing, conning or intimidating another human being is the major cause. The self-image of criminals rise and falls based upon whether others meet their expectations. Criminals harbour an enormous fear of being let down. By reacting with anger, they are able to ward off a sense of worthlessness. Although their anger is not visible, it simmers within them and ignites on encountering the slightest thing beyond their control.

Whereas a non-criminal person gains respect through achievement and believes that respect is earned, for a criminal, respect is shown by others submitting to him. Perceived put-downs are quick. He becomes annoyed very fast. It has been found that nothing works when efforts are made to change a criminal (Martinson, 1974). Statistics indicates that four out of ten people were rearrested and reconvicted after being released back into the community.

Rehabilitation means to restore to former capacity, as given in Webster dictionary. Attempts to rehabilitate criminals successfully have mostly resulted in a failure. The major reason for failure of such programs is their failure to understand that criminals think differently from responsible people. The majority of criminals resist change, and shortly after their release from prison revert back to their old habits of committing crime. Change involves helping a criminal to habituate himself which exceeds the scope of rehabilitation. It requires a far reaching change in his thinking.

Integral to such programs is helping the inmates acquire skills so that they can live on their own in society without resorting to crime. One such program that targets the thinking pattern is the Think First program. This program was designed by James Mc Guire, a forensic clinical psychologist from UK (Bull et al., p 179). It consists of twenty two group-based sessions. This program is built up on cognitive-behavioural principles. The program aims to provide criminals with alternative responses by providing them with skill in problem awareness, problem-definition, information gathering, alternate thinking and perspective taking. Thus prisons and detention homes should focus on creating such programs that help the criminals in correcting their urges to commit crimes.

Vocational training remains a priority in rehabilitation centres. The criminals are provided real work experiences by teaching them transferable job skills and work ethic which helps them prepare for their future. Money management skills are also taught to the criminals. Programs in the arts are designed to help them discover and nurture their creative potential. Individual psychotherapy is available in some juvenile detention centres. Many rehabilitative programs provide "success experiences" thereby enhancing the criminal's self-esteem.

Yochelson developed a technique in which criminals were taught to report their thinking so that it could be monitored, and errors pointed out and corrected (Samenow, 2014). Because of the criminal's habitual lying, in such a program the agent of change maintains contact with a responsible person who knows the criminal well. This is done with the criminal's knowledge, especially once he is released. He is asked to swallow his anger rather than express it. He has to learn to benefit from criticism and cope with rejection. He is made to learn to anticipate the situations in which he might be angry. Inculcating fear and guilt are essential to change. An effective program for change places total responsibility on the criminal. Decisions are not made for the individual. Each specific decision is made by the individual himself. The change process requires that criminals acquire moral values that have always enabled people to survive.

But providing such vocational training or making a criminal financially literate is of no sense without bringing a fundamental change in the way the criminal thinks. A lasting change in the behaviour of criminals could occur only with a 180 degree alteration in their thinking. To eliminate criminal behaviour, it is essential to change the faulty thought pattern of the criminal. It requires demolishing old thinking patterns, teaching new concepts and building a new structure wherein the criminal puts into action what he is taught. It requires phenomenological approach i.e. understanding the world from the criminal's point of view. It is impossible for a person to embrace a way of life that he has previously scorned.

As is said in the Old Testament, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). We are as we think. It is impossible to help a person give up crime without helping him to change what is his thinking.

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