PSYCHOLOGY OF CRIMINAL INTENT: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT VIOLENT CRIME

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Abstract: This article considers serious crime as a function of psychological and social functioning. Personal intentions, impulses and drives, personal intent and organized criminal structures are being kept in mind in this overview of criminality from a psychological point of view.

Keywords: criminality, criminal activity, violent crime, serious crime, psychology, criminal psychology, forensic psychology

I. Social prerequisites of criminal activity

Social turmoil, drastic social changes, inequality and unemployment classically lead to an increase of criminal activity (Fajnzylber, 2002). Failed states, weak government or lack of law enforcement
simply call for criminal structures to fill the void of law and order. Revolutions happen at times of social turmoil and lack of governmental control, with or without economic inequality serving as a trigger. At times, the very fact of low economic activity in the country suggests criminality as seemingly the only way out (UNODC, 2006).

On the other hand, in any state, wealthy or not, there are different slices of the society, different sub-populations which have very different lives and realities compared to the mainstream population. Personal circumstances, differences in development and completely different perspectives create and maintain those sub-societies. We all know what does it mean being raised in so-called bad neighbourhoods; life seems to revolve around social problems and it is very difficult, if at all possible, to compensate social flaws with personal effort (Kling, 2005). Chances for success in life are being proportionally decreased with the `quality` of the neighbourhood where one is being brought up (Sampson, 1994). Nevertheless, there are also examples of how own will and determination may change such an unfavourable course of life (Leibrich, 2003).

Furthermore, children in families where parents are drug-dependent as well as children of parents with mental problems are more vulnerable overall and are more likely to follow the path of their parents or enter a criminal path at a very early age (Bonde, 1997). Here we talk about certain genetic predispositions superimposed on behavioural patterns learned from the close environment. Feeling uncomfortable and out of place makes people wonder if they are natural failures and struggle against the flow makes very little sense (Levitt, 2013).

Working-class neighbourhoods also call for low educational level. Not necessarily that there are no educational establishments available in the area; instead, it occurs mostly because education in such areas is not regarded as an asset and often looked down at. That creates a certain peer pressure which is normally very difficult to overcome. On the other hand, oftentimes further education does not seem as anyhow practical solutions, simply because lack of money and other resources push people to seek employment very early in life instead of getting into any training (Wilson, 1987). That naturally creates a problem with finding qualified employment; competition for unqualified job posts is very high, whereas the payment is normally very low. In criminal circles, however, employment may give much higher returns in shorter periods of time, which makes choosing organized criminal organizations as potential employers much more likely. Furthermore, growing up in disadvantaged areas may also lead to developmental problems which make children more vulnerable. These children then naturally become vulnerable adults after a somewhat troubled youth.
When rather considering personal, stand-alone criminal activities rather than becoming a part of bigger, organized criminal groups, a similar rule applies: the less a person can count on in life, the less healthy social support they get, the more the chance of committing a crime of any sort (Weatherburn, 1999). Frustration, devastation and, at times, just a strong desire to break the circle and start living better push people to do things they may, or may not, regret later.

II. Personality and criminal intent

Previously referred as psychopathy, and in modern terminology referred to as personality disorders, this personality characteristic is thought to be present in at least part of the criminal population (Fachzagedan, 2017). There is, however, no accord on this matter since most studies rely on results of correlational studies which are only approximate in nature and do not prove any cause and effect.

On the other hand, it is widely accepted that lack of empathy and perhaps theory of mind is often the case when considering criminals with regards to their victims as well as other persons in the further environment. It is unclear, however, if such a lack of compassion to others, sometimes linked to mental toughness, may be considered as a pathological feature per se and if it can be developed over time or rather inherited as an in-build personal characteristics (Goldstein, 1996). Furthermore, it is very difficult to judge if such lack of compassion is systematic and affects all spheres of life including the closest environment, or it is rather a position taken towards the outer world. It is clear that empathy vanishes with drug abuse, simply because drugs make persons dependent on their own needs and sensations and push them disregard the outer world whenever it does not serve their purpose. When however talking about lack of empathy as an approach without necessarily being connected to any substance abuse, there is no consensus in the literature with regards to its nature and development as personality feature. Moreover, further complications in assessment arise because mostly static personality profiles of known criminals are being performed, without any thorough follow up. Thus, we cannot judge how certain personality features develop over time.

When talking about committing cold-blooded premeditated criminal acts, there is still doubt if any pathology in the narrow sense underlies the decision to take up such activities. Premeditated calculated acts of violence, for instance, may simply represent an approach which would rather be defined with help of game theory terminology. There is a set of players, one takes a certain position and is determined to win. We may, therefore, speak here about rules of game, strategy and tactics rather than pathology of any sort. In this light, criminal acts may, at least sometimes, represent human desire to survive and win, rather than to destroy and abuse. It Is no doubt that such games, even though remotely reminding chess, are far from being harmless. Nevertheless, the dilemma
stays: can it actually be that some criminals enter the game for the sake of playing, and not necessarily due to other reasons such as feeling the necessity to commit violent acts?

We come here to a conclusion that entering criminal circles and/or initiating some criminal activity far not necessarily requires a person to have any mental or social problems. Instead, some persons may simply love the excitement of playing the game. If successful, they win; if not, then they lose it all.

**III. Personal dynamics in the framework of social realities**

Criminal intentions are by far not in born, people develop them in the course of their lives, given personal predispositions, situations they find themselves in, the state of their mental and physical health, their habits and social circles. In this light, we can always regard development of criminal tendencies as personal dynamics which occurs in the framework of given social realities.

Do criminal activities necessarily lead to any kind of degradation, in any sense? The answer to this question seems to be actually negative. It is obvious that being pushed outside the society, feeling unappreciated and even hated creates some mental states which can potentially lead to mental illness or degradation of some mental functions. Nevertheless, we should also assess criminality as some kind of profession, instead of purely applying any standard moral values to its effects. Any profession suggests some professional deformation, no doubt. On the other hand, any profession, certainly, requires a set of very special skills which one can consider as a sign of development and not any kind of degradation. In this light, we can consider criminal activities as a way for self-development, self-realization and even specialization, even when it is hard to accept due to revolting effects they are being linked to. We should not, therefore, apply purely moral or clinical criteria when talking about development of criminal behaviour. Rather, we should apply logical consideration of such development and its effects. Only this way we may actually understand how criminal mind works, and use this knowledge in future preventive programmes.

**IV. Crime and remorse**

Far not always any kind of remorse follows the crime; it is however not that rare that a certain feeling of remorse is being omnipresent and accompanies criminal acts. It is a mistake to understand people who cross the line as villain super-humans depriving them of any feelings or moral qualities. In fact, participation in any criminal activity should be considered, on its own, as a very emotional act, whereas participation in any organized crime is in fact connected to a very strict moral code, even
when such moral rules differ a great deal with any widely accepted and desirable social behavioural patterns. Interestingly, indeed such criminal moral code may be accompanied by a partial or even complete lack of empathy towards victims. This lack of empathy per se is however should not be considered as purely emotionless behaviour. There may exist some kind of repression when overwhelming feelings are being suppressed to the extent no feelings are being exhibited or even perceived by the person committing a crime. In this light, it is impossible to ascribe senselessness to persons involved in criminal activities, even those participating in violent crime. In fact, it quite the opposite may be the case: they may be overwhelmed and divided by controversial feelings which may result in very premeditated calculated acts of violence. We often underestimate the power of repression. Its roots may at times be found in one’s childhood; in certain cases, though, repression may be built upon and developed over prolonged periods of time.

It may sound completely illogical to think of, say, serial or professional killers as emotional human beings. In our ‘normal’ understanding these people should be deprived of any moral, any empathy, any respect for other human beings and human life in general. In reality, however, the situation is much more complex and we simply cannot apply a standard set of certain ‘moral values’ to persons committing violent crime. They do indeed have a certain behavioural code, even when it does not coincide with the ‘normal’ human approach to human life as we know it. They may have their principles and moral values, even when we may consider them bizarre and outrageous. Furthermore, they may have certain feelings which we simply cannot comprehend as they live upon completely different moral code. Logically, if ‘normal’ persons including psychologists and forensic psychiatrists do not understand criminal motivations fully, they should not apply strictly ‘normal’ and clinical criteria to those who are different. That by no means implies that we as professionals should regard the results of serious crime as normality. We simply should not apply a standard set of rules to those who develop and function differently. In order to understand criminal way of living and prevent crimes whenever possible, we need to go beyond any strict criteria and stop searching for clinical pathologies at any time possible. Rather, our task is to understand and to help, where possible, both sides, i.e. both criminal and victims. It seems reasonable to presume that modern crime prevention programmes mostly fail because instead of trying to understand criminal minds and their lives, we attempt at judging, condemning and pathologizing them. That does not though rule out the fact that many criminals indeed have certain mental health problems. What we talk here about is primarily which approach should be used in relation to crime prevention and repair of damages consequent to any serious crime. We should not push persons committing crimes to remorse either; remorse is a very complex process which requires inner maturity and development. We need to attempt at helping such development to occur, not forcing it. Any kind of ultimatum in this regard normally
leads to the opposite effect; this is, partially, why correction institutions fail to correct abnormal behaviour and instead oftentimes exacerbate any criminal tendencies and ideas which the person may have had before.

The above considerations by no means diminish the negativity and practically barbaric destroying nature of the acts of violence. On the contrary, it is an attempt to look into the way criminal mind works. It would be much simpler to consider criminals as illogical repulsive human beings not respecting or feeling anything at all. In order to fight crime in our society, we need to understand how human psyche works, without pathologizing everything we cannot understand. Only when we understand the motivations, drives and prerequisites behind serious crime, we can prevent some of that crime happening in real life.

V. No way out? May criminal past ever have a happy ending?

It should be taken for granted that, for many reasons, starting normal social life after a series of criminal acts may be at the very least very difficult, at most quasi impossible. To start with, whenever most of social links are being reduced to those from the criminal world, a person lacks the capacity to communicate effectively to the outer world. Secondly, learned behavioural patterns often prevent persons to enter new situations outside their usual routine. Furthermore, the whole reactivity pattern learned during years of criminal activities, the acquired mindset as well as expectations and desires evolved often revolve around the habitual path. In this light, the desire to enter a new life path may be even lacking or be insufficient to actually make the first necessary steps towards a drastic change of life. Moreover, any such change may be naturally frightening as it puts the person into absolutely unknown circumstances where there are many difficulties but way too little, if any, guarantees. Finally, certain obligations before one’s colleagues in the criminal world may, partially or completely, prevent safe exit from such an environment.

Nevertheless, experience shows that it is possible, for some persons, to overcome the issues mentioned above, and start their lives completely anew. One should not underestimate the power of human will, particularly when keeping in mind that when some criminals may be driven to their style of life involuntarily due to lack of own judgment and strong will, others exhibit excessive own will and may direct it to getting out of the vicious criminal circle. Some criminals, after years of being completely absorbed by violence and disregard to human life, may actually start living peaceful life, with or without remorse with regards to their previous doings. It is however extremely difficult in reality, particularly when the so-called ‘professional deformation’ is being taken into account. The power of long-lasting habits, values acquired along the way and motivations used to maintain one’s
existence throughout many years of criminal activities, now needs to be changed and substituted by completely new values and attitudes. That is, obviously, easier said than done. Nevertheless, it does not seem as impossible as it sounds. One may only imagine that criminal minds who have some kind of dual value sets in-built, who are able and want to function in both worlds, may somehow switch in between those worlds without too much struggle. This is, however, a purely theoretical conclusion as there is practically no published research on the matter. In fact, it is very difficult to study the matter scientifically or even acquire any kind of statistics for such cases for obvious reasons.

VI. Criminality, stress and fear of death

When some violent criminals may indeed have a strong omnipresent fear of death which they try to fight with repressing feelings and, oftentimes, taking drugs and alcohol as a possible cure against fear, some other persons participating in serious crime may seemingly stay calm without any indication of substance abuse or any other compensation for extreme levels of stress experienced on daily basis. Either way, the very presence of such elevated stress levels has its effects on any person without exceptions. The classical example of the fear of death may be either suppressed or, alternatively exacerbated. The third way of dealing with fear of death in such extreme situations is to presume that one is simply immune from death. Such kind of dissociation from reality, particularly in cases of persons performing acts of violence on everyday basis, seems to actually be quite common. The saying that ‘death is something which happens to other people’ is very applicable to this set of mind. When one is hurting others, one may presume that it occurs only one way, and it is virtually impossible for them to suffer the fate of their own victims. That seems to be some sort of subconscious defense mechanism: by ignoring the obvious, one perceives stress reduction which becomes a habit after all.

Interestingly, there is also a sensation-seeking element of entering and maintaining criminal circles. This area is completely under-researched however there are strong indications that sensation-seeking is playing a significant role in choosing professions and life style in general, and choosing a criminal path in particular. In this sense, stress associated with criminal life style is more like a conscious choice, it may be desirable and is therefore less detrimental. Nevertheless, chronic stress in any forms leads to psychological and physiological damage in most cases, the fact which should definitely not be disregarded.
VII. The role of drugs and alcohol

Drugs and alcohol are classically being used by some people as stress reduction technique. At this point we need to point out that, in fact, actual action of drugs is very complex and that is a common misconception that consuming substances generally leads to relaxation. To take alcohol as an example: many people are unaware of the fact that it is in fact a depressant, and not a relaxant of any kind (Valenzuela, 1997). Depending on its quantity, alcohol may lead to low mood and even depression which, in turn, aggravates rather than relieves the stress. That means that by consuming alcohol people oftentimes achieve the effect quite contrary to their initial goal which would be stress reduction.

Talking about stimulants, the action is also quite complex and depends on the dosage, frequency of use and any other substances taken at the same time. Cocaine, for instance, may lead to paranoid delusions with excessive use which is indeed far from stress relaxation (Porrino, 2007). On the other hand, despite some pleasurable sensations, cocaine produces an over-stimulation of sensory systems thus leads to physical and psychological exhaustion which is, by definition, stress in its pure form. In this light, stimulants as well cannot be considered a good tool when fighting stress.

Furthermore, one needs to consider the addictive aspect of substance abuse. The mere fact of getting addicted to any substance means reduction of free will (the mere definition of dependence), substituting values and, most of all, rejecting reality and shifting people to quite another reality which far not necessarily correspond to the actual outer world in any respect. This pathway is dangerous also because of this reality substitution which may lead to inadequate reactions and behaviour, among other things.

The bottom line is that, even though drugs and alcohol are considered by many as an easy and accessible stress reduction technique, such substances in reality rather create new problems than solve any of them. That applies to any stress, including that coming from continuous participation in acts of violence which, no doubt, serves as a continuous source of extreme stress per se.

VIII. Criminality in life-span

Starting a criminal career does not necessarily needs to lead to a life-long occupation, though it often actually does. As mentioned above, many social and personal factors affect the criminal life-span and the ability and the mere desire to discontinue the criminal way of life. In case of some continuity of criminal life style, there exists a certain personal development which many ‘ordinary citizen’ falsely
regard as degradation. Criminals develop their lives, they continuously learn new skills to stay afloat, they adapt to stress, they love and get married, they do indeed have children and wives. The lone-wolf approach exists of course, however it is by far more common that members of the underground society live certain life which can, in some sense, be compared to lives of the rest of us. Differences between the two worlds have been discussed above; as to similarities, one needs to point out that, criminal or not, human mind has its developmental cycle and we all have desires, emotions, goals, failures and successes, regardless the presence of criminal activities or absence thereof. It is not that much different on the other side; the only difference is the application point. Another reference point, other values, other goals; nevertheless, a similar life-span after all.

IX. Psychotherapy and criminal intent: Does psychotherapy make sense at all?

These days psychologists are getting more involved in assisting protagonists of violent crime providing them psychological services, at least in penitentiary settings. Until recently the focus of criminal and counseling psychologists was mostly to help victims of violent crime. We have disregarded the needs of the criminal population for too long, forgetting that if there is no communication with this part of population, there will be more and more crime around us. Normal moral values are not applicable in certain situations; a medical doctor should not refuse treating a person just because they may happen to exercise certain criminal activities. For a doctor, a patient is a patient regardless their line of work; the same applies to the role of psychologists with regards to the criminal population.

References:


