

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CRIMINAL OFFENCE AND SELF SERVING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

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Abstract: *Literature in the field of aggressive and violent behavior indicated a strong link between anti-social behavior and self-serving cognitive distortions. The concept of self-serving is represented by a series of distorted cognitive processes, which can take shape due to the generally oversized tendency of self-perception. The purpose of this study was to investigate the possible positive relationships between different levels of offences/ crimes and self-serving cognitive distortions in a sample of juvenile delinquents and young individuals from Romania. The assessment of the self-serving cognitive distortions was measured with the How I Think Questionnaire and the type of the criminal offence was taken from the Institutional evaluation sheet. Data was gathered from 55 juvenile delinquents, ages between 15 and 19, the average age being 17.13 (SD = .92). Positive correlations were found between the different levels of offences/ crimes and self-serving cognitive distortions, except for Self-Centered, Minimizing/Mislabeled, Physical Aggression and Stealing. These results suggest that as the level of offence gets higher so does the level of self-serving cognitive distortions and anti-social tendencies.*

Keywords: *anti-social behavior; juvenile delinquency; self-serving cognitive distortions; criminal offence.*

I. Introduction

The importance of attitudes in relation with juvenile delinquency and adult crime has started to be addressed in the literature decades ago (e.g., Glueck & Glueck, 1930; 1934). In line with this, Mylonas & Reckless (1963) identified a series of attitudes that can associate with anti-social behavior, such as: attitudes of self-justification, loyalty, faith in luck and the tendency to exacerbate society's defects. Other researchers have associated antisocial behaviors with attitudes towards legal institutions, legal authority or other offenders (Gendreau et al., 1979), as well as with emotions such as shame, guilt or pride as a consequence of the anti-social acts (Shields & Whitehall, 1994).

One of the modern theories of aggression and aggressive behavior postulates that there is strong evidence from practice and research on the link between cognition and aggressive behavior (Sestir & Bartholow, 2007). In a meta-analytical study, criminogenic needs (anti-social values, behaviors and cognitions) proved to be the best predictor of recidivism in adults (Gendreau, Little & Goggin, 1996). Investigations of the origins, development and maintenance of antisocial behaviours underline the importance of self-serving cognitive distortions regarding the social cognitions of juvenile delinquents and young individuals (Gibbs, 2003).

The concept of self-serving is represented by a series of distorted cognitive processes, which can take shape due to the generally oversized tendency of self-perception (Myers, 2015). In other words, self-serving prejudices are represented by a series of cognitive strategies that allow an individual to have a very positive self-image, generally with egocentric manifestations (Matsumoto, 2009).

Anti-social behavior is described as an externalizing behavior that negatively affects other individuals, directly or indirectly, by violating important moral or social norms, including delinquent and aggressive acts such as serious aggressive acts (e.g. murder, rape or violent content attacks) or lesser acts of aggression (such as stealing) (Barriga et al., 2001).

From the explanations provided in the literature that have attempted to elucidate the beginning, development and persistence of antisocial conduct and violent behavior, cognitive distortions related to antisocial behaviors or individual's deficiency in interpreting social events can offer important explanations regarding the thinking patterns of adolescents. These patterns of thinking may have criminogenic value because they have the potential to isolate the individual from fault or a negative self-concept (Barriga et al., 2000).

Self-serving cognitive distortions (Barriga et al., 2001) can be divided into four categories, such as: 1. Self-Centered - attitudes by which individuals focus on their own needs and rights, to the extent that the views and needs of others are very little, or never taken into account or respected; 2. Blaming Others –represented by cognitive patterns designed for the misdirection of guilt resulting from the individual's negative behavior and externalized to sources outside the individual; 3. Minimizing/Mislabeling–represented by thinking patterns in which anti-social behavior is viewed as an acceptable way to achieve certain objectives, as well as the dehumanizing and degrading way of referring to other individuals; 4. Assuming the Worst - represented by the attribution of hostile intentions to others, the perception that the most unpleasant scenario is inevitable or the perception that their own behavior is beyond the scope of improvement (Gibbs, Potter & Goldstein, 1995).

Literature mentions a series of tools that evaluate criminal thinking, criminal attitudes and cognitive distortions such as: Criminal Sentiments Scale-Modified (CSS-M; Simourd, 1997); Measure of Criminal Attitudes and Associates (MCAA; Mills, Kroner & Forth, 2002); Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles'' (PICTS; Walters, 1995). In order to evaluate self-serving cognitive distortions, the How I Think Questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001) was developed based on the four categories of cognitive distortions (Self-Centered, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabeling and Assuming the Worst).

II. Objective and hypothesis

The present study aims to investigate the possible positive relationships between different levels of offences/ crimes and self-serving cognitive distortions in a sample of juvenile delinquents and young individuals from Romania. The formulated hypothesis is that there will be a positive relationship between the intensity of the criminal offence and the levels of self-serving cognitive distortions.

III. Research methods

3.1. Participants

In the present study there were included 55 participants, 6 belonged to the female gender (10.9%) and 49 participants belonged to the male gender (89.1%), with the ages between 15 and 19, the average age being 17.13 (SD = .92). In terms of their education level, participants were classified as it follows: without education (20%), low level of education (40%), medium level of education (32.7%) and appropriate level of education (7.3%). Regarding their family of origin, 1.8% of the participants were classified without parents, 20% came from single-parent families and 78.2% came from bi-parental families. Of the 55

participants, 31 had no criminal record (56.4%) and 24 of them had a criminal record (43.6%). The reasons the participants were incarcerated were the following: robbery (25.5%), stealing (23.6%), murder (16.4%), rape (9.1%), driving without a license (9.1%), profanation of graves (3.6%), attempted robbery (3.6%), prison-breaking (1.8%), false testimony (1.8%), murder and robbery (1.8%), attempt of murder (1.8%) and trafficking of minors (1.8%). The gender distribution of the sample reflects the majority of male prisoners from the Arad Penitentiary from Romania, the Arad Probation Service from Romania and the Buziaş Re-education Center from Romania.

3.2. Instruments

How I Think Questionnaire (HIT, Barriga et al. 2001) – HIT was developed to assess self-serving cognitive distortions (Self-Centered, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabeling, Assuming the Worst) and 4 types of anti-social behaviors (Opposition-Defiance, Physical Aggression, Lying and Stealing). HIT (Barriga et al., 2001) contains 54 items, with a 6-points Likert type response scale, ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (6). The questionnaire consists of 12 scales, meaning that of the 54 items, 39 items were designed to assess the four self-serving cognitive distortions, 8 items evaluate the level of anomalous responding, and 7 items are positive filters (in order to camouflage the 39 items). The 39 items also refer to the four categories of anti-social behaviors. The sum of Opposition-Defiance and Physical Aggression refers to the Overt Scale, which is represented by the direct confrontation with the victim, and the sum of Lying and Stealing refer to the Covert Scale, which is represented by anti-social behaviors that do not involve direct confrontation with the victim (Barriga et al. 2001). HIT was linguistically validated in a previous study with an internal consistency ranging between .531 (Positive filters) and .863 (Overt Scale), with an alpha-Cronbach coefficient for the whole questionnaire of .914 (Demeter et al., 2018).

Institutional evaluation sheet – This standardized data sheet includes information on criminal history and the crimes committed. The data was obtained for each individual participant from the institutional psychological /individual evaluation sheet provided by the Arad Penitentiary from Romania, the Buzias Re-education Center from Romania and the Arad Probation Service from Romania.

3.3. Study Design and Procedure

In the present study, a correlational design will be used, were the positive association between the self-serving cognitive distortions and the intensity of the criminal offences will be investigated. The investigated variables are: the scales and sub-scales of HIT (Total Hit, Overt Scale, Covert Scale, Self-Centered, Blaming Others, Minimizing/Mislabeling, Assuming the Worst, Opposition-Defiance, Physical Aggression, Lying and Stealing) and the level of the criminal offence (1 - driving without a license, false testimony; 2 - prison-breaking, stealing; 3 - profanation of graves; attempted robbery; 4 – robbery; 5 - trafficking of minors, attempt of murder, rape; 6 – murder).

The How I Think Questionnaire (Barriga et al. 2001) was administered to the participants in a paper-pen format. The participants were given an informed consent consisting in an agreement of participation to the research, a short description of the aim of study and an assurance on the confidentiality of the collected data. The institutional psychological/individual evaluation sheet was accessed through a written request addressed to the representative of the institutions where the study took place (i.e., the Arad Penitentiary from Romania, the Buziaş Re-education Centre from Romania and Arad Probation Service from Romania). The data collection took place between November 2017 and April 2018, and the completion of the questionnaire was approximately 20-25 minutes for each participant.

3.4. Results

The data was processed using the SPSS 17 software. Besides the variables mentioned above, the scores for the Anomalous responding (scale that measures the sincerity of the responses) scale of the HIT Questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001) were calculated in order to control the sincerity of the answers given in this study (Table 1). According to literature, if the score on the Anomalous Responding scale is higher than 4.00, then the protocol is suspect as to the sincerity of the response; if the score is higher than 4.25 then the protocol may not be considered as valid (Barriga et al., 2001). The mean value for the Anomalous Responding scale of the studied group was: $M = 3.23$ ($SD = 1.15$). This value indicates that the participants provided unbiased answers to the questionnaire elements.

Table 1. Alpha Cronbach coefficients for HIT Questionnaire (Barriga et al., 2001)

HIT Scales	α
Anomalous Responding	.757
Total HIT	.931
Overt Scale	.847
Covert Scale	.890
Self-Centered	.744
Blaming Others	.767
Minimizing/Mislabeling	.802
Assuming the Worst	.761
Opposition-Defiance	.756
Physical Aggression	.744
Lying	.736
Stealing	.874

In order to calculate the positive relationship between the intensity of the criminal offence and the levels of self serving cognitive distortions, Spearman correlation test was used. The obtained scores were as it follows: Total HIT ($r = .312^*$, $p < .05$), Overt Scale ($r = .300^*$, $p < .05$), Covert Scale ($r = .292^*$, $p < .05$), Self-Centered ($r = .179$, $p > .05$), Blaming Others ($r = .456^{**}$, $p < .01$), Minimizing/Mislabeling ($r = .179$, $p > .05$), Assuming the Worst ($r = .320^*$, $p < .05$), Opposition-Defiance ($r = .339^*$, $p < .05$), Physical Aggression ($r = .218$, $p > .05$), Lying ($r = .366^{**}$, $p < .01$) and Stealing ($r = .212$, $p > .05$).

I.V. Discussions and conclusions

The present study investigated the assumed positive associations between different levels of offences/ crimes and self-serving cognitive distortions in a sample of juvenile delinquents and young individuals from Romania. The data from this study partially confirm the hypothesis, meaning that positive relationship between the different levels of offences/ crimes and self-serving cognitive distortions were registered for nearly all the scales of the How I think Questionnaire (Barriga et al. 2001). Exceptions in terms of positive associations were found for the sub-scales assessing the dimensions: Self-Centered, Minimizing/Mislabeling, Physical Aggression and Stealing. Result also showed that the Blaming Others self-serving cognitive distortion and Lying anti-social tendency had the strongest positive relationship with the levels of offences/ crimes compared to all the other cognitive distortions or anti-social tendencies.

These findings suggest that as the level of offence gets higher (i.e. murder or rape), so does the level of self-serving cognitive distortions (especially Blaming Others) and anti-social tendencies (especially Lying) in the investigated sample. In line with this, one can

assume that offenders with more aggressive crimes have a thinking pattern that justifies their actions by blaming other individuals and deceiving others for personal gain. The results of this study are consistent with other studies in the literature that provide a strong evidence from practice and research on the link between cognition and aggressive behavior and underline the importance of self-serving cognitive distortions regarding the social cognitions of juvenile delinquents and young individuals (Barriga et al., 2000; Barriga et al., 2001; Gibbs, 2003; Sestir & Bartholow, 2007).

In conclusion, the results of this study are promising and relevant in the understanding of social cognitions and criminal thinking of juvenile and young offenders from Romania. The findings can offer valuable insights for developing intervention programs based on the severity of the offence, in order to reduce the complexity of the self-serving cognitive distortions. The programs can be based on an already existent educational models, such as the one developed by Gibbs, Potter & Goldstein (1995), called EQUIP, which consists in educating moral judgment, pro-social abilities, anger management, and aims at diminishing anti-social behavior by reducing the levels of the self-serving cognitive distortions of juvenile delinquents and offenders.

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