

THE SELF-CONCEPT IN THE CRIMINAL: AN EXPLORATION OF ADLERIAN THEORY

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Despite the sociological impact and the extensiveness of crime in all societies, surprisingly little progress has been made in our knowledge of the dynamics of criminality. More effort has been expended in disproving fanciful speculations and empirical findings than in the systematic exploration of theoretically-derived propositions. Numerous reviews and bibliographies (4, 5, 6, 10) of research in this field attest to the rather meager and confused status of our present knowledge. Schuessler and Cressey (12), after summarizing 113 research studies conducted over a period of 25 years, find that in 42% of the cases the criminals did not differ from the normal on the dimensions studied. The authors point out that the doubtful validity of many of the obtained differences and the lack of consistency in the results make it impossible to conclude that personality factors are related to criminality. Corsini (5) indicates that the level of research, in general, has not progressed beyond the description of crimes, autobiographical accounts of criminals, and psychoanalytic investigations of individuals, the sum total of which tends to contribute little to the understanding of the dynamics of criminal behavior. In a review of 37 research studies, Rouke (9) shows that a good deal of effort in the 1940's dealt with studies of the relationship between intelligence and crime, and for the most part the results were refutations of earlier investigations.

There is certainly no dearth of biological, psychological, and sociological theories of crime. In many cases, however, the validity of a theory rests only on selected case histories. Few experimentally-controlled studies have been attempted, and these have often not supported the theory in question.

It is the purpose of the present investigation to explore some of the propositions of Adlerian theory concerning the relationship between the self-concept and criminality.

Adler (1) postulates that (a) the main dynamic force of the criminal, as of all other human beings, is a striving from a position of felt inferiority to one of superiority; (b) the direction that the criminal takes to satisfy his desire for superiority is a private and personal one,

that is, he is not concerned with his fellow-beings as his striving contributes nothing to others; he is striving for a goal of personal superiority; (c) he likes to believe that he is a hero, and (d) "crime is a coward's imitation of heroism" (1, p. 205). In other words, the criminal "hides his feeling of inadequacy by developing a cheap superiority complex" (3, p. 414). This superiority complex appears in his bearing, his character traits, and in his opinion of his own superhuman gifts and capacities (2). Rouke (10) also points out that the criminal act is ego-centric and therefore immature.

Regarding the development of the criminal personality, Adler contends that the roots of the lack of cooperation go back to early childhood. During the first four or five years of life a block has occurred in the development of the criminal's interest in others. Such blocks may arise in connection with his mother, father, and fellow children, and with the social biases surrounding him. Such blocks are likely to be particularly acute in children with special difficulties, namely, children with imperfect organs, pampered children, and neglected children. As a result of his continuous training against cooperation, the criminal "has lost the hope of achieving success in the normal tasks of life" (1, p. 230). Unlike other failures, however, he has retained a certain activity which he throws on the "useless side of life" (1, p. 230). Thus he differs from the neurotic, suicide, and drunkard in that, to a certain extent, he can cooperate with those whom he perceives to be like him, that is, other criminals. The criminal can sometimes have friends, but only among his own kind. He cannot make friends, or feel at home, with ordinary people. His sphere of social interest is narrowed, and even love he regards merely as a piece of property which can be bought.

Based upon this conception of the criminal personality, the following hypotheses concerning the self-concept in the criminal have been derived for the present experimental investigation: (a) the criminal has a relatively favorable opinion (conscious) of himself; (b) the self-concept of the criminal is significantly superior to that of the normal person; (c) the criminal's concept of the other person is less favorable than that of the normal; (d) the discrepancy between the self- and the ideal-concepts is significantly smaller in the criminal than in the normal; and (e) the criminal depreciates others more, relative to his self-concept, than does the normal person.

In a previous study by the authors (7) Adlerian hypotheses regarding neurosis and schizophrenia were tested in a similar fashion

as in the present study, and the concept of the "inferiority complex" of the neurotic was found supported.

METHOD

Subjects. Two groups of 46 male subjects each were selected. The criminal group consisted of white, native American prisoners who, at the time of testing, were in the reception center of a state penitentiary. None had been in prison for more than 60 days, the average period of imprisonment being 16 days. They ranged in age from 17 to 64 years with a mean of 28.3 ± 9.5 , and in education from the sixth grade to three years in college with a mean of 8.9 ± 3.5 . Almost every type of crime was represented; the predominant crimes were burglary and theft.

The normal control group was equated particularly for age and education and as far as possible for socio-economic status. The subjects were selected from male parents of college students, members of an American Legion post and a junior chamber of commerce, and from psychiatric aides at a state hospital. They ranged in age from 19 to 67 years with a mean of 31.3 ± 10.1 , and in education from the sixth grade to three years in college with a mean of 10.5 ± 2.3 . The differences in age and education between the two groups were too slight to be significant at the .05 level.

Instrument and procedure. To obtain a measure of the self-concept, the Self-Activity Inventory developed by the senior author for the USAF (13) was employed.¹ This Inventory consists of 54 items, which describe reactions to the arousal of achievement, sexual, and dependency needs, and of hostility. Sample items are:

7. Relies on his parents to help make decisions.
13. Gets confused when working under pressure.
15. Has difficulty in getting down to work.
16. Feels guilty about his past sex life.

As can be seen, the reactions are all negative: they are ineffectual in solving the problem in question and, moreover, are likely to precipitate further social conflicts.

The subject responds to each item in three columns. In the first column, he indicates how frequently *he does*, in general, act in the manner described in the item by encircling a number from 1 (indicating *never*) to 5 (indicating *always*)—the self-concept column. In the second column he indicates in the same way how frequently *he would like to* engage in the action in question—the ideal-concept column. In the third column he indicates how frequently in his opinion *other people do* act in the manner described—the other-concept column.

From each column a concept score is derived by adding the ratings. Since the items are all negative statements, a high score in the first column represents an unfavorable self-concept; in the second column, a low ideal-concept; in the third column, an unfavorable other-concept.

In addition, two discrepancy scores were derived: (a) the self—ideal discrepancy, which is the sum of the absolute differences on each item between the self

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ratings and the ideal ratings, and (2) the self—other discrepancy, which is the algebraic difference between the total ratings for the self column and the “other” column.

The test-retest reliabilities of the three concept scores after a period of eight weeks were found to be .79 for the self, .72 for the ideal, and .78 for the other person (13). The evidence for the validity of the Inventory in discriminating groups varying in adjustment, and for predicting responses under stress are presented elsewhere (7, 8, 13).

The Inventory was introduced to all subjects with the announcement that the experimenter was from the Department of Psychology (with the additional statement for the prisoners that in no way was he connected with the penitentiary) and that he was conducting a research project on the way people evaluated themselves on a number of common activities. The results in all cases were to be kept confidential and in no way would affect the subjects. To increase the probability of securing honest self-appraisals, the subjects were asked not to give their names on their papers, nor any other data that would help identify them. If they did not care to cooperate, they were free not to respond to the test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-concept scores. On the basis of Adlerian theory it was predicted that the criminal's self-concept would be relatively favorable, and be superior to that of the normal person. The results shown in Table I confirm these two predictions.

TABLE I. CONCEPT SCORES FOR 46 NORMALS (N) AND 46 CRIMINALS (C) (DISTRIBUTIONS AND TESTS OF SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MEANS)

Score	Self-concept		Ideal-concept		Other-concept	
	N	C	N	C	N	C
190					3	
180					3	4
170	1				1	3
160	1				12	8
150	5	1	1		6	4
140	11	3	0		8	6
130	6	7	1		4	7
120	9	10	2	3	4	6
110	9	5	7	7	3	1
100	2	10	13	5	0	1
90	2	5	7	10	2	3
80		4	11	15		3
70		1	4	6		
M	132.0	114.9	99.6	93.8	150.6	141.6
SD	17.7	18.7	15.9	13.9	23.6	25.9
<i>t</i>		4.53*		1.83		1.71

*Significant beyond the .01 level.

The mean self-concept score of the criminal is 114.9, indicating that his mean self rating is about 2 (meaning *seldom*) regarding each of the 54 unfavorable behaviors comprising the Inventory. In other words, the criminal describes himself as a rather capable and well-adjusted person.

The mean self-concept score of the normals is 132.0 ± 17.7 , which is significantly less favorable than that of the criminals, the *t*-ratio of the difference between the two means being 4.53, which is significant far beyond the .01 level. Inspection of the two distributions shows that whereas 20 criminals rate themselves below 110, only 4 normal subjects do, and whereas only 11 criminals rate themselves 130 and above, 24 normals do. One might argue that the criminals were more motivated to lie deliberately and to present the best picture of themselves. But this is not likely since the Inventory was answered anonymously as mentioned earlier, the experimenter was in no way connected with the institution, and the items were in no way related to criminal acts.

Ideal-concept scores. Adler states that the criminal "is struggling to be superior" and that his goal "is always to be superior in a private and personal manner" (1, p. 200). Since the Inventory does not deal with moral ideals but rather with personal attainments and goals, we could expect that the criminal would present a high ideal-concept, but we could not be sure that this would be higher than that of normals. Therefore we had decided to let the "data speak for themselves" rather than to make specific predictions. Table 1 shows that the criminals have a mean score signifying a higher ideal-concept than the normals, but that the difference falls short of being significant at the .05 level (*t*-ratio of 1.83). The distributions for both groups are somewhat skewed and do not present the striking differences that we observed in the self-concept scores.

Other-concept scores. We did predict, however, that the criminal would view the other person less favorably than would the normals. This hypothesis was derived from Adler's observation that the person with a "superiority complex" tends to depreciate others more than average. The data in Table 1 do not support this prediction. The mean other-concept score for the normals is 150.6 ± 23.6 and for the criminals, 141.6 ± 25.9 . Thus, contrary to prediction, the criminals rated others slightly more favorably than the normals did, although the difference is not significant at the .05 level (*t*-ratio of 1.71).

An explanation for this finding may be that possibly there is no basis for comparison here; normals and criminals may have rated different reference groups. As Adler pointed out, criminals "can form gangs and they can even show loyalty to one another. But . . . they cannot make friends with society at large" (1, p. 202). It may be, then, that the criminals were referring to their own kind, that is, other criminals with whom they are associated, while the normals were rating the average person in society at large with whom they come in contact. If this is so, the loyalty of the criminals to their own kind may have resulted in the more favorable ratings. Unless we knew that both groups judged the same "other" persons any comparison would be tenuous.

Self-ideal discrepancy scores. In view of Adler's conception of the criminal as manifesting a "cheap superiority complex" characterized by the opinion of his "own superhuman gifts and capacities" (2, pp. 121-122), we predicted little discrepancy between self- and ideal-concepts and that this discrepancy would be significantly lower than that of the normals. As Table 2 shows, the mean self-ideal discrepancy for the criminals is only 34.5 ± 21.5 , whereas for the normals, the mean discrepancy score is 47.0 ± 21.1 , which is significantly larger (t -ratio of 2.84). Whereas 29 normals (63%) score a discrepancy of

TABLE 2. SELF-IDEAL DISCREPANCY SCORES FOR 46 NORMALS (N) AND 46 CRIMINALS (C) (DISTRIBUTIONS AND TEST OF SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE MEANS)

Score	N	C
120	1	
110	0	
100	1	
90	0	
80	2	
70	1	4
60	4	3
50	10	7
40	10	3
30	8	8
20	4	4
10	3	12
0	2	5
M	47.0	34.5
SD	21.1	21.5
t		2.84*

TABLE 3. SELF-OTHER DISCREPANCY SCORES FOR 46 NORMALS (N) AND 46 CRIMINALS (C) (DISTRIBUTIONS AND TEST OF SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE MEANS)

Score	N	C
30	2	
20	2	2
10	3	1
0	2	6
-10	4	7
-20	11	1
-30	6	8
-40	8	5
-50	4	7
-60	2	6
-70	1	2
-80	1	1
M	-19.9	-27.0
SD	25.7	25.5
t		1.34

*Significant at the .01 level.

40 and above, only 17 criminals (37%) do. Thus the hypothesis of the significantly smaller discrepancy between the self-concept and the ideal-concept in the criminal is confirmed.

Self—other discrepancy scores. The mean discrepancy score between self-concept and other-concept (Table 3) is -27.0 ± 25.5 for the criminals and -19.9 ± 25.7 for the normals. The difference between these two means, however, is not significant at the .05 level (t -ratio of 1.34). Thus, though there is a trend in support of the hypothesis that criminals depreciate others more than normals do—relative to their respective self-concepts—, the hypothesis, as tested by the present Inventory, must be rejected. Again, however this may be because the criminals may have conceived of the “others” as other criminals, as mentioned earlier.

Item analysis. An analysis of the 54 Inventory items based on the self-concept scores was performed in order to derive hypotheses and generalizations concerning the nature of the “superiority complex” of the criminal. For this purpose, the frequency distribution on each item of both groups combined was dichotomized as close to the median as possible. A t -statistic was then employed to test the significance of the proportion of cases falling below and above the median. It was found that 11 items differentiated significantly between the two groups at the .01 level. The probability of obtaining 11 items at the .01 level of significance out of 54 items is far beyond .001 (11).

Inspection of the 11 significantly differentiating items shows that four deal with reactions to sex. The criminals are significantly less dissatisfied or guilty about their sex activities, less “awkward in their relationships to the opposite sex,” and less “stimulated sexually when reading or talking about sex” than are the normals. This is in line with Adler’s statement that criminals “regard the partner in love merely as a piece of property, and very often we find them thinking that love can be bought” (1, p. 203).

Most of the other discriminating items validate the “superiority complex” of the criminal which Adler postulated. The criminal *rarely* or *never* “refuses to do things because he is not good at them,” or “feels inferior to his friends,” or “fails to take the initiative in meeting people, arranging dates, etc.” His loyalty to his own group is significantly demonstrated by his *never* gossiping “about the misfortunes and embarrassments of his friends” (35 out of 45 criminals),

never being "annoyed when asked to do a favor by a friend" (28 out of 46), and *never* or *rarely* looking "for weaknesses in others" (40 out of 46).

Thus the criminal regards himself as quite competent and superior, expresses callousness to problems of sex, and loyalty to his own social group. Cross-validation with a new sample of criminals may demonstrate the validity of this characterization of the criminal.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of Adlerian theory concerning the dynamics of the criminal personality, the following hypotheses on the nature of the self-concept in the criminal were proposed for the present investigation: (a) the criminal has a relatively favorable opinion of himself; (b) the self-concept of the criminal is significantly superior to that of the normal person; (c) the criminal's concept of the other person is less favorable than that of the normal; (d) the discrepancy between the self- and the ideal-concept is significantly smaller in the criminal than in the normal; and (e) the criminal depreciates others more, relative to himself, than does the normal person. The Self-Activity Inventory consisting of 54 items of need-satisfaction patterns was administered to 46 criminals and 46 normals matched for chronological age and educational status. The results show that:

1. The mean self-concept of the criminal is relatively favorable and significantly superior to that of the normal person (hypotheses *a* and *b*).
2. Though the mean ideal-concept of the criminal is higher than that of the normal, the difference is not significant.
3. No significant difference between the mean other-concepts of the criminals and the normals was found (hypothesis *c*).
4. The mean self—ideal discrepancy in the criminal is significantly smaller than in the normal person (hypothesis *d*).
5. Though the criminal depreciates others more, relative to himself, than does the normal person, the difference is not significant (hypothesis *e*).

While hypotheses *c* and *e* found no support, the present study may not have been a valid test for these, since the two groups may have used different reference groups for their "other" ratings, the criminals possibly referring to other criminals rather than to other persons in society in general.

Item analysis of the Inventory yielded eleven items which discriminated significantly between normals and criminals regarding self-concept. Inspection of these items supports Adler's conception of the criminal as having a "superiority complex" regarding his ability to achieve, showing callousness toward sex, and professing loyalty to his own group.

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