

# Psychological underpinnings of criminal behaviour

## Abstract

Criminal behaviour is on a rampant rise in India. It is extremely complex to understand its genesis. The current study focuses on reviewing the available literature to highlight the role of psychological factors in the predisposition towards engaging in such behaviour which primarily includes personality, psychiatric conditions, intelligence, emotional style, need for achievement and self-control. These factors interact with each other to produce varying degrees of behaviour.

**Keywords:** psychological, underpinning, criminal behaviour, India

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## Introduction

“Don’t become a mere recorder of facts, but try to penetrate the mystery of their origin” (Ivan Pavlov as cited in Alcorn, 2009, p. 77). Criminal behaviour in the wider context of antisocial behaviour can be equated with delinquency, antisocial personality disorder and traits of aggression and impulsivity.<sup>1</sup> There has been a rampant rise in the crime rate in India over the past decade. According to the report published by the National Crime Record Bureau in 2015, the crime rate is 581.1 per 100,000 of the population. Crimes against children have risen 5.3 percent since 2014 and there has been an increase of 2.5 percent as in other sexual offenses against women. As emphasized by Pavlov, mere information is not beneficial for the scientific and social community, going into the depth of the reason for such increase in statistics can help in formulation preventive measures. Criminal behaviour is extremely complex to understand its genesis completely. There are numerous underlying facets which do not exist in a vacuum. These factors interact with each other to produce varying degrees of behaviour. However, the emphasis of researchers has been to extract individual contributing factors and then view their contributory effects.

## Results and discussion

Ysenck proposed that “criminal behaviour is the result of an interaction between certain environmental conditions and features of the nervous system”.<sup>2</sup> He suggested that individuals who engage in criminal behaviour are influenced by the combination of environmental, neurobiological and personality factors, not born. This hypothesis has been studied by researchers around the globe and has been confirmed by most. Personality traits contribute to one’s tendency to engage in criminal behaviour. Levine et al.,<sup>3</sup> found that psychoticism predicted self-reported delinquency whereas high psychoticism and neuroticism predicted under socialization.

They conducted a subsequent study which provided acceptable evidence of the concurrent validity of these primary scales with Self Reported Delinquency.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with these findings, in one study NEO Five Factor Inventory was administered on 54 detained, mentally disordered offenders, and found that high neuroticism, low extroversion, and low agreeableness were found to be correlated to criminal behaviour.<sup>4,5</sup> There is a certain amount of disagreement

amongst researchers when it comes to the presence of the three personality factors among those who engage in criminal behaviour. While some state that all three elements are high in these individuals, others have found low scores on the extraversion domain. However, most research that has been conducted has found elevated levels of neuroticism.

In support of the above statement, in a comprehensive research study, Mottus found that the chances of committing an offense were also raised by low agreeableness and conscientiousness and high neuroticism.<sup>6</sup> Apart from traits, psychopathology is also closely associated with criminal behavior. Antisocial personality disorder has been found to be highly prevalent amongst prisoners. Not only does it affect one’s behavior, but also the age and severity.<sup>7,8</sup> Personality is crucial to understand the behaviour of offenders and can further help in conceptualizing therapeutic modules. In addition to personality factors, other individual variables like intelligence, emotional behaviour, and academic achievements also determine the chances of an individual to indulge in criminal behaviour. “Individual Differences in Young Offender Emotional Behaviour” was studied by Clarbouret al.,<sup>9</sup> which confirmed social anxiety, malevolent aggression, and self-esteem as the three emotional style factors in young offenders. Lower scores on malevolent aggression and higher scores on social anxiety and social self-esteem were found to be significantly associated with first police contact later in life.

The three scales were also found to relate methodically and predictably to a range of other personality and emotional style levels.<sup>9</sup> It has also been found that serious delinquents with low IQ committed more delinquent acts than higher IQ dangerous offenders. It was also found that the ones with lower IQ exhibited the highest levels of cognitive and behavioural impulsivity, and compared with higher IQ serious delinquents, low IQ serious delinquents were exposed to more risk factors, such as low academic achievement, being old for grade, depressed mood and poor housing.<sup>10,11</sup> This encompasses emotional intelligence as well which has been seen to be significantly lower in people who have committed a crime.<sup>12,13</sup> In the Indian context, criminal behaviour has been associated with higher scores on intelligence, impulsivity, suspiciousness, self-sufficiency and lower scores in emotional stability in those with a criminal record than average population.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Conclusively, the role of psychological factors is evident in criminal behaviour. Conceptualizations that focus on a multitude of factors including personality traits, co morbid psychiatric conditions, attitudes and cognitions, affective component and motivation can further facilitate management of the risk factors as well as interventions.<sup>15–28</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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