
FROM NORMALCY TO DEVIANCE: UNDERSTANDING WHY ORDINARY INDIVIDUALS COMMIT EXTRAORDINARY CRIMES

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ABSTRACT

With the persistent assumption that crime is the product of inherently deviant personalities, society often separates offenders from ordinary individuals by attributing criminal acts to abnormal character. However, increasing psychological and sociological observations indicate that severe offences are frequently committed by otherwise law-abiding persons placed under intense situational pressure¹. While public discourse continues to portray criminals as fundamentally different from the rest of society, everyday circumstances such as emotional distress, social expectations, authority influence, and perceived opportunity can gradually weaken moral restraints and alter decision making².

The object of this research paper is to examine how ordinary individuals transition into offenders when confronted with extraordinary circumstances. It seeks to analyse the role of situational stress, fear, humiliation, sudden provocation, group behaviour, and environmental pressures in shaping conduct that departs from previously lawful behaviour. The paper aims to understand whether criminal behaviour is always the outcome of deliberate intent, or whether it may arise from momentary psychological strain interacting with surrounding conditions.

Furthermore, this research paper attempts to connect these behavioural observations with legal principles of intention, responsibility, and mitigation in order to evaluate how culpability should be determined. The analysis has been drawn from books, news articles, documented criminal cases, true crime documentaries, recorded interviews, and other secondary sources. The study ultimately questions the rigid distinction between the “criminal” and the “ordinary” individual and explores whether extraordinary crimes are less a reflection of abnormal personalities and more a reflection of ordinary human psychology placed in extreme situations.

¹ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007).

² David Myers, *Social Psychology* (13th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2018).

Introduction

The phenomenon of crime presents one of the most complex questions in the study of law and human behaviour: how does an individual who has lived within the bounds of legality suddenly engage in conduct that shocks society? Public narratives frequently simplify criminal acts as the outcome of evil intent or moral failure, yet many documented cases reveal that offenders often emerge from otherwise stable and conventional backgrounds³. This paradox demands a deeper inquiry into the conditions under which behaviour shifts from conformity to transgression.

Human decision making is not exercised in isolation. It is influenced by emotional states, social surroundings, power dynamics, perceived threats, and the immediate pressures of a given moment⁴. In situations involving intense stress, conflict, or perceived injustice, individuals may respond in ways that contradict their prior values and self-image. The transformation is rarely instantaneous; rather, it is shaped by cumulative pressures, rationalisations, and altered perceptions of right and wrong.

Scientific and behavioural research further indicates that stress and heightened emotion can significantly impair cognitive functioning.⁵ When individuals experience fear, anger, humiliation, or desperation, the brain prioritises immediate survival or emotional relief over long term reasoning and moral evaluation. Logical assessment of consequences may weaken, while impulsive or defensive reactions become stronger. Social environments also reinforce behaviour through imitation, validation, or diffusion of responsibility, creating conditions where actions that would normally be restrained appear justified or unavoidable. From a rational standpoint, crime in such contexts can be understood as a distorted but predictable human response to extreme internal and external stimuli rather than as an inexplicable departure from normality.

This paper therefore seeks to investigate the interplay between ordinary human psychology and extraordinary situations, exploring how external pressures and internal vulnerabilities interact to produce serious offences. By analysing behavioural patterns alongside legal standards of accountability, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of crime as a human

³ James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (1996).

⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011)

response shaped by context rather than solely by character.

Conceptual Framework-

The present study is grounded in the understanding that crime is not merely a legal violation but a complex social and psychological construct. What is defined as crime varies across societies, cultures, and historical periods, indicating that criminality is shaped not only by individual conduct but also by social norms, moral standards, and legislative frameworks. From a psychological standpoint, crime involves cognitive processes, emotional states, and behavioural responses, while from a sociological perspective, it reflects structural inequalities, cultural conditioning, and institutional influence. Therefore, criminal behaviour must be analysed at the intersection of the individual mind and the social environment.

A central component of this framework is the distinction between criminal personality and situational criminality. The theory of criminal personality suggests that certain individuals possess enduring traits such as impulsivity, aggression, lack of empathy, or antisocial tendencies that predispose them to unlawful behaviour. According to this view, extraordinary crimes are the outcome of inherent character defects or pathological tendencies. In contrast, situational criminality argues that behaviour is heavily influenced by context. Ordinary individuals, when exposed to extreme stress, authority pressure, group conformity, emotional disturbance, or perceived injustice, may engage in acts that are inconsistent with their usual moral standards. This study critically examines whether extraordinary crimes are more accurately explained by stable personality traits or by powerful situational forces that temporarily override moral restraint.

The framework further engages with the long-standing nature versus nurture debate. The nature perspective attributes criminal behaviour to biological predispositions, genetic influences, hormonal imbalances, or neurological structures that affect impulse control and aggression. The nurture perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes upbringing, family environment, socio economic status, peer influence, cultural exposure, and learned behaviour as determining factors. Rather than adopting an extreme position, this research acknowledges that criminal conduct often emerges from an interaction between biological vulnerability and environmental triggers. An individual may possess certain psychological predispositions, but whether these predispositions translate into criminal action frequently depends on situational context and social conditioning.

By integrating crime as a social and psychological construct, differentiating between personality based and situational explanations, and evaluating the interplay between nature and nurture, this conceptual framework provides a multidimensional lens through which extraordinary crimes committed by ordinary individuals can be understood. It shifts the focus from simplistic labelling of offenders as inherently deviant to a deeper examination of how human behaviour is shaped by internal dispositions and external circumstances.

Psychological Theories Explaining Criminal Behaviour

Understanding why ordinary individuals engage in extraordinary crimes requires an examination of established psychological theories that explain how behaviour is shaped, justified, and intensified under certain conditions. The following theories provide insight into the cognitive and social mechanisms that may lead law abiding individuals to commit serious offences.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory proposes that behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.⁶ Individuals learn not only through direct experience but also by observing the actions of others and the consequences that follow. When aggressive or unlawful behaviour is rewarded, normalized, or left unpunished, it becomes more likely to be replicated.

In the context of crime, exposure to violence in the family, peer groups, media, or community environments may gradually normalize deviant conduct. An ordinary individual may not begin with criminal intent but may adopt such behaviour after repeated exposure to models that justify or reward it. Thus, crime can be understood as learned behaviour rather than inherent wickedness.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains the psychological discomfort that arises when an individual's actions conflict with their beliefs or moral standards.⁷ To reduce this discomfort, individuals often modify their attitudes or justify their behaviour rather than change the act

⁶ Albert Bandura, "Social Learning Theory" (1977).

⁷ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957).

itself.

When ordinary individuals commit crimes, they rarely perceive themselves as immoral. Instead, they rationalize their conduct by shifting blame, minimizing harm, or convincing themselves that their actions were necessary. For example, a person committing financial fraud may justify it as a response to unfair treatment or economic hardship. Through self-justification, the individual preserves a positive self-image while engaging in unlawful conduct.

Deindividuation Theory

Deindividuation Theory suggests that individuals in group settings may lose their sense of personal identity and responsibility. In crowds or collective environments, anonymity reduces self-awareness and weakens internal moral controls.

This theory explains why ordinary individuals may participate in mob violence, riots, or collective aggression that they would not engage in alone. The diffusion of responsibility within a group creates psychological distance from the consequences of the act. As personal accountability diminishes, impulsive and extreme behaviour becomes more likely.⁸

Moral Disengagement Theory

Moral Disengagement Theory explains how individuals temporarily deactivate their moral self-regulation mechanisms in order to commit harmful acts without experiencing guilt. This process involves several cognitive strategies such as dehumanizing victims, minimizing consequences, displacing responsibility, or framing harmful conduct as serving a higher purpose.

Through moral disengagement, extraordinary crimes become psychologically manageable. Individuals convince themselves that the victim deserved the harm, that the damage was insignificant, or that they were merely following orders. This internal restructuring allows ordinary individuals to engage in acts that contradict their usual ethical standards.

Obedience to Authority

Obedience to Authority highlights the tendency of individuals to comply with directives issued

⁸ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895).

by perceived authority figures. Social conditioning teaches individuals to respect hierarchy and follow instructions, even when those instructions conflict with personal morality,⁹ famously demonstrated in experiments by Stanley Milgram.

Under authoritative pressure, individuals may shift responsibility to the authority figure and suppress personal judgment. This mechanism helps explain participation in institutional violence, war crimes, and systemic misconduct. Ordinary individuals may commit extraordinary acts not out of personal malice but due to structured authority systems that demand compliance.

Groupthink

Groupthink refers to a psychological phenomenon in which the desire for harmony and conformity within a group suppresses dissenting opinions and critical thinking. Members prioritize consensus over ethical evaluation.

In such environments, individuals may agree to or participate in unlawful acts to avoid isolation or rejection. The collective illusion of unanimity creates a false sense of moral correctness. Extraordinary crimes committed within corporate groups, political factions, or extremist organizations often stem from groupthink dynamics, where questioning the decision is discouraged.

Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis

The Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis posits that aggression is often the result of blocked goals or unmet expectations. When individuals experience persistent frustration, humiliation, or perceived injustice, aggressive impulses may emerge.

While frustration does not always lead to violence, intense or repeated frustration increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour. Crimes of passion, road rage incidents, domestic violence, and sudden violent outbursts can often be traced to accumulated emotional strain. Under extreme frustration, rational judgment may be overshadowed by impulsive emotional reaction.

⁹ Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience” (1963).

The Power of Situational Forces

While individual psychology plays a significant role in shaping behaviour, situational forces often act as powerful catalysts that transform thought into action. Circumstances can alter perception, weaken restraint, and reshape moral judgment within a short span of time.¹⁰ This section examines how external environments and structural dynamics influence ordinary individuals to engage in extraordinary criminal conduct.

Environmental Triggers

Human behaviour is highly responsive to surroundings. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, social instability, exposure to violence, and chronic stress create conditions where unlawful conduct may appear rational or necessary.¹¹ Environmental triggers do not automatically produce crime; however, they increase vulnerability by normalising survival-based decision making.

High pressure environments such as competitive corporate sectors, conflict zones, or dysfunctional family settings can gradually distort ethical boundaries. When individuals repeatedly encounter injustice, humiliation, or deprivation, their threshold for moral compromise may decline. In such contexts, crime may emerge as a perceived solution rather than an impulsive act of deviance. Strain-based explanations of crime, particularly those advanced by Robert K. Merton, emphasise how structural pressures push individuals toward deviance when legitimate means to achieve socially accepted goals are blocked.¹²

Role of Authority and Power Structures

Power hierarchies significantly influence behaviour. Institutions such as governments, corporations, military organisations, and law enforcement agencies operate within structured chains of command. Within such systems, individuals often prioritise loyalty, obedience, and conformity over independent ethical reflection.¹³

When authority structures legitimise questionable conduct or subtly reward compliance

¹⁰ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007).

¹¹ Richard Quinney, *The Social Reality of Crime* (1970).

¹² Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938).

¹³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (1922).

without scrutiny, individuals may internalise institutional goals as morally justified. Power can also create asymmetry, where those at the top exploit subordinates, and subordinates feel compelled to comply due to fear of punishment or loss of status. In such settings, criminal acts may not stem from personal hostility but from systemic normalization of unethical directives.

Mob Psychology and Crowd Behaviour

Crowd environments significantly alter behavioural patterns. In collective settings, emotional intensity tends to amplify, while rational evaluation diminishes. Individuals in mobs often experience heightened excitement, anger, or fear, which spreads rapidly through social contagion.

Crowds create a temporary collective identity that overrides individual self awareness. Acts of violence committed during riots or mass protests are frequently driven by shared emotional momentum rather than calculated intention. The anonymity of the group reduces inhibition, making extreme behaviour appear acceptable within the collective context. Ordinary individuals, who may otherwise avoid confrontation, can become active participants in destructive acts when submerged within a charged crowd dynamic.

Diffusion of Responsibility

Diffusion of responsibility occurs when individuals believe that accountability is shared among many participants, thereby reducing their personal sense of guilt or obligation.¹⁴ When multiple people are involved in a harmful act, each person perceives their role as minor and therefore less blameworthy.

This mechanism is particularly visible in corporate fraud, institutional abuse, and collective violence. Individuals justify their participation by reasoning that the decision was made collectively or that they were merely performing a small part of a larger process. As responsibility becomes diluted, moral restraint weakens. The absence of direct accountability fosters an environment where extraordinary crimes can be committed without immediate psychological resistance.

¹⁴ Bibb Latané and John Darley, “Bystander Intervention in Emergencies” (1968).

Influence of Social and Cultural Factors

Social and cultural contexts fundamentally shape human behaviour and response to social pressures, including the likelihood of engaging in criminal activity. Crime is not committed in a vacuum; it is embedded in the complex interplay of family dynamics, economic conditions, media messaging, and cultural norms that collectively influence perceptions of right and wrong. The following analysis draws on empirical research and sociological evidence to explain how these factors contribute to criminal conduct by individuals who are otherwise considered “ordinary.”¹⁵

Family Background and Upbringing

Family environment plays a foundational role in shaping values, coping mechanisms, and behavioural responses. Children raised in stable, supportive households with consistent emotional nurturing are generally more resilient and socially adjusted. Conversely, families marked by conflict, neglect, abuse, or criminal involvement create psychological and behavioural patterns that increase the risk of later offending. Research in social psychology indicates that meaningful relationships, emotional support, and positive role models during early life are protective against later violent and antisocial behaviour¹⁶; in their absence, individuals are more likely to adopt maladaptive coping strategies and antisocial behaviour as learned responses.

In the Indian context, children who experience the trauma of parental incarceration or family disruption are observed to struggle with emotional regulation, anxiety, aggression, and social integration all of which are risk factors for future criminal behaviour¹⁷

Socio-Economic Stress

Socio-economic stress including poverty, unemployment, inequality, and lack of access to education exerts immense pressure on individuals and communities. When legitimate opportunities for social mobility are blocked, frustration and despondency may escalate, increasing the appeal of non-normative or criminal paths as coping mechanisms or means of economic survival. Surveys and studies of urban populations in India show that unemployment,

¹⁵ Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (1942).

¹⁶ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979)

¹⁷ Navbharat Times

inequality, and social inequality are consistently cited as major social concerns, with potential links to heightened crime perceptions and frustration¹⁸

Socio-economic deprivation also intersects with cultural expectations and familial pressure; for example, expectations for educational success or financial achievement may intensify distress when individuals are unable to fulfil them, contributing to experiences of desperation that can manifest in criminal conduct.

Media Influence

Media environments including television, cinema, news outlets, and social platforms profoundly influence norms and perceptions of violence. While media can raise awareness and promote positive social behaviour, it can also normalise or glamorise aggression, conflict, and criminal behaviour through repeated exposure. Viral videos, sensationalised crime reporting, and social media reinforcement of fame, status, and power can distort moral boundaries, particularly among impressionable youth.

In contemporary India, reports indicate that juvenile gangs and violent youth behaviour have been amplified by social media platforms that portray dangerous conduct as thrilling or prestigious, with fan accounts and viral clips celebrating aggressive ‘gang’ identities. Such media dynamics can recalibrate cultural narratives, making violence appear socially acceptable under certain conditions and weakening normative restraints.

Cultural Normalization of Violence

Cultural contexts incorporate beliefs, traditions, and historical legacies that may legitimise, tolerate, or minimise certain forms of violence. In multi-ethnic and pluralistic societies like India, communal tensions, caste-based prejudices, and identity-based conflicts continue to shape patterns of inter-group violence even when overt large-scale riots have declined. Reports suggest that mob violence and hate-based attacks may persist as structural features of social division, with deep-rooted distrust and hostility often exacerbated by misinformation and polarised narratives¹⁹.

Moreover, domestic violence remains pervasive despite legal protections, with significant

¹⁸ Page 9, Navjivan

¹⁹ Express Media Service

proportions of women reporting physical or emotional abuse within intimate relationships a reflection of ingrained patriarchal norms and cultural tolerance of intra-household violence. These cultural patterns can normalise violence in everyday life, reducing societal stigma and empowering individuals to act in ways that harm others without perceiving themselves as criminally deviant.

Biological and Neurological Perspectives

While social and psychological explanations are essential, biological and neurological research provides additional insight into why certain individuals may display aggressive, impulsive, or risk-oriented behaviour under particular conditions. Modern neuroscience does not suggest that crime is biologically predetermined; rather, it indicates that biological factors can influence behavioural tendencies, emotional regulation, and decision making²⁰. These influences become particularly significant when combined with environmental stressors.

Hormonal Influences

Hormones regulate emotional intensity, aggression, and stress responses. Testosterone, for example, has been associated with dominance seeking, competitiveness, and increased aggression in certain contexts. Studies in behavioural endocrinology show that elevated testosterone levels, particularly when combined with social provocation or perceived threat, may increase the likelihood of aggressive reactions. However, testosterone does not directly cause criminal behaviour; it amplifies behavioural responses depending on situational triggers.

Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, also plays a critical role. Chronic exposure to stress may dysregulate cortisol production, affecting impulse control and emotional stability. Individuals experiencing prolonged stress may exhibit heightened reactivity, reduced patience, and impaired decision making. Thus, hormonal imbalances do not independently create criminals, but they may lower thresholds for impulsive or aggressive behaviour when environmental pressures are intense²¹.

Brain Structure and Impulse Control

Neuroscientific research highlights the importance of specific brain regions in regulating

²⁰ Adrian Raine, *The Anatomy of Violence* (2013).

²¹ George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis" (1969).

behaviour. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for reasoning, judgment, and impulse control, plays a central role in moral decision making.²² Reduced activity or developmental impairment in this region has been linked to poor self-regulation and increased risk-taking behaviour.

Similarly, the amygdala, which processes fear and emotional responses, influences aggression and threat perception. Hyperactivity in emotional processing regions, combined with reduced regulatory control from the prefrontal cortex, may result in impulsive actions without full consideration of consequences. Neuroimaging studies of violent offenders have, in some cases, demonstrated irregular patterns in these areas, suggesting diminished capacity for emotional regulation.

However, neurological variations indicate predisposition rather than inevitability. Many individuals with similar brain patterns do not engage in criminal behaviour, underscoring the interaction between biology and environment.

Genetic Predisposition vs Free Will

The question of genetic influence on crime remains one of the most debated issues in criminology and behavioural science. Twin and adoption studies suggest that certain traits associated with criminal behaviour such as impulsivity, sensation seeking, or reduced empathy may have heritable components. Variations in genes associated with neurotransmitter regulation have been studied in relation to aggression and antisocial tendencies.

Nevertheless, genetic predisposition does not eliminate free will. Genes may influence temperament, but they do not dictate behaviour. Environmental upbringing, social norms, education, and conscious decision making significantly shape how biological tendencies are expressed. A person may inherit a predisposition toward impulsivity, yet strong social support and moral development can prevent criminal manifestation.

The interplay between biology and autonomy raises important legal questions regarding culpability. While biological vulnerabilities may mitigate understanding of behaviour, criminal law continues to operate on the principle that individuals possess the capacity for choice unless severely impaired.

²² Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (1996).

Role of Emotion and Mental States

Emotions are powerful drivers of human behaviour and, when intense or prolonged, can significantly distort judgment and moral reasoning. Anger, particularly when linked with humiliation or perceived injustice, often fuels acts of revenge²³. In such states, individuals may prioritise emotional satisfaction over legal or ethical consequences, rationalising harmful actions as justified retaliation.

Similarly, fear activates survival instincts that can override rational thought. When individuals perceive threat, whether real or imagined, the instinct to protect oneself or loved ones may result in disproportionate or unlawful responses²⁴. Jealousy and obsession further illustrate how emotional fixation can gradually erode restraint. Persistent suspicion, possessiveness, or fear of loss may transform into controlling or violent behaviour, especially when combined with insecurity or rejection²⁵.

Beyond individual emotions, collective psychological states also influence criminal behaviour. Moral panic occurs when society reacts intensely to a perceived threat, often amplified by rumours, misinformation, or sensationalised narratives²⁶. In such situations, communities may collectively exaggerate danger and justify extreme actions in the name of protection or social order. Emotional contagion within groups can escalate tensions rapidly, turning fear and outrage into coordinated hostility²⁷. Thus, both personal emotional turbulence and socially shared anxieties demonstrate how mental states can temporarily overshadow rationality, leading ordinary individuals toward extraordinary acts.

Legal Perspective

Understanding why ordinary individuals commit extraordinary crimes requires examining how the legal system interprets intention, responsibility, and mental capacity. Criminal law does not merely punish harmful acts; it evaluates the mental state behind those acts, the degree of participation, and the circumstances influencing conduct. The following principles illustrate

²³ Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression* (1939).

²⁴ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (1996).

²⁵ Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and Emotional Disorders* (1976).

²⁶ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972).

²⁷ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895).

how law balances accountability with fairness²⁸.

Mens Rea and Criminal Intent

Mens Rea, meaning “guilty-mind,” is a foundational element of criminal liability²⁹. For most serious offences, it is not enough to prove that a harmful act occurred; the prosecution must establish that the accused possessed the required mental intention or knowledge at the time of committing the act.

Intent can take different forms. It may involve direct intention, where the outcome was consciously desired, or knowledge, where the individual was aware that harm was a likely consequence³⁰. For example, if a person carefully plans an assault, purchases a weapon, and executes the attack, the presence of prior planning demonstrates clear criminal intent. In contrast, if a driver accidentally causes harm due to momentary negligence, the absence of deliberate intention may reduce the offence to negligence rather than intentional violence.

The doctrine ensures that criminal punishment reflects moral blameworthiness. It recognises that the same act may carry different legal consequences depending on the mental state behind it³¹.

Individual Liability vs Collective Liability

Criminal law generally operates on the principle of individual liability, meaning each person is accountable for their own actions. However, situations involving group conduct complicate this principle. When crimes are committed by mobs, corporate bodies, or organised groups, the law may impose collective or shared liability³².

For instance, in cases of unlawful assembly or riot, individuals who share a common objective may be held responsible for acts committed by members of the group, even if they did not personally execute the final act. This doctrine prevents participants from escaping liability by claiming minimal involvement.

²⁸ H.L.A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility* (1968).

²⁹ Glanville Williams, *Criminal Law: The General Part* (1961).

³⁰ Andrew Ashworth, *Principles of Criminal Law* (2016).

³¹ Nathulal v. State of Madhya Pradesh, AIR 1966 SC 43.

³² Indian Penal Code, ss 34, 149; Masalti v. State of Uttar Pradesh, AIR 1965 SC 202.

Similarly, corporate criminal liability allows companies to be prosecuted for fraud, environmental damage, or regulatory violations carried out through their agents. Here, the organisation itself may face penalties, while key decision makers may also be held individually liable. These provisions reflect the legal system's recognition that extraordinary crimes often occur within structured group dynamics rather than isolated individual action.

Insanity Defence

The insanity defence acknowledges that criminal responsibility requires the capacity to understand the nature and consequences of one's actions. If an individual, due to a severe mental disorder, is incapable of comprehending that their act was wrong or unlawful at the time of the offence, they may not be held fully criminally liable³³.

This defence does not apply to every mental illness. The legal standard is strict and focuses on cognitive incapacity rather than emotional disturbance. For example, if a person suffering from a severe psychotic episode genuinely believes they are acting under divine command or self defence against an imagined threat, and cannot distinguish reality from delusion, the court may consider insanity as a defence.

However, successful invocation is rare, as courts require clear medical evidence demonstrating that the accused lacked the ability to understand the wrongfulness of the act at the precise time it was committed.

Mitigating Circumstances

Mitigating circumstances do not absolve guilt but reduce the severity of punishment by recognising contextual factors that influenced behaviour. Courts consider aspects such as provocation, age, absence of prior criminal record, mental stress, coercion, or socio economic hardship³⁴.

For example, if an individual commits an offence after prolonged domestic abuse, the court may treat the history of victimisation as a mitigating factor during sentencing. Similarly, a young first time offender who acted under peer pressure may receive a more rehabilitative

³³ Indian Penal Code, s 84; M'Naghten Rules.

³⁴ Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab, AIR 1980 SC 898.

sentence rather than a purely punitive one.

Mitigation reflects the legal system's attempt to individualise justice. While the act remains unlawful, the punishment acknowledges human vulnerability and situational complexity.

Ethical and Philosophical Debate

Beyond psychology, biology, and law lies a deeper philosophical inquiry into human nature and moral responsibility. When ordinary individuals commit extraordinary crimes, the question extends beyond "how" and "under what conditions" to "why" at the most fundamental level. Ethical philosophy challenges us to examine whether human beings truly act out of free and autonomous choice or whether their behaviour is shaped, and perhaps constrained, by forces beyond their control.

Free Will vs Determinism

The debate between free will and determinism sits at the heart of criminal responsibility. Determinism suggests that human behaviour is shaped by prior causes such as upbringing, social environment, biological predisposition, and psychological conditioning. If every action is the inevitable result of preceding factors, then criminal conduct may be viewed as a product of circumstance rather than genuine moral choice.

Free will, on the other hand, asserts that individuals possess the capacity to make conscious decisions independent of external pressures. From this perspective, even when influenced by social or biological factors, a person retains the ability to choose between right and wrong. The criminal justice system largely operates on this assumption, holding individuals accountable on the belief that alternative lawful choices were available to them.

The tension between these positions becomes evident in morally complex crimes where background adversity is significant. If a person raised in violence later commits violence, is the act freely chosen or conditioned? The philosophical answer remains contested, and the resolution of this debate directly influences how society conceptualises punishment and reform.

Are People Inherently Good or Evil?

Another enduring question concerns the intrinsic nature of human beings. Some philosophical

traditions maintain that humans are fundamentally self-interested and capable of harm when restraints are removed. Others argue that individuals are inherently compassionate, and that destructive behaviour arises primarily from corrupted environments or distorted beliefs³⁵.

Historical and contemporary events demonstrate that ordinary individuals can display both profound kindness and extreme cruelty depending on context. This dual capacity suggests that human nature may not be strictly good or evil, but situationally responsive³⁶. Ethical analysis therefore shifts from labeling individuals as inherently immoral to examining the conditions under which moral boundaries weaken or strengthen.

Understanding this complexity challenges simplistic narratives of “monsters” and instead encourages examination of the social, structural, and psychological frameworks that shape behaviour.

Responsibility in Morally Complex Situations

Morally complex situations often involve competing duties, divided loyalties, or perceived necessity. For instance, individuals may justify harmful actions as protecting family honour, preserving national security, or obeying institutional commands. In such contexts, moral clarity becomes blurred, and individuals may genuinely believe they are acting for a greater good³⁷.

Ethical responsibility requires evaluating not only the outcome of actions but also the reasoning process behind them. Philosophical thought emphasises that moral agency involves critical reflection, the capacity to question authority, and the courage to dissent from unjust norms. When individuals surrender this reflective capacity, whether out of fear, conformity, or loyalty, accountability remains a central concern.

Ultimately, the ethical debate does not eliminate responsibility but complicates it. It acknowledges that while human behaviour is influenced by numerous forces, moral agency persists. The challenge lies in recognising situational pressures without absolving individuals of the duty to exercise conscience and judgment³⁸.

³⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762).

³⁶ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007).

³⁷ Nuremberg Trials (1945–46).

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

Preventive Measures and Social Implications

Examining why seemingly ordinary individuals engage in extraordinary crimes goes far beyond theoretical curiosity; it reflects a significant societal obligation. When criminal conduct arises from a complex interplay of psychological fragility, social influence, biological factors, and situational pressures, preventive strategies must be equally comprehensive. Meaningful prevention depends on timely intervention, institutional reform, cultivation of ethical judgment, and the availability of mental health resources³⁹.

Awareness and Education

Awareness is the first line of prevention. Many extraordinary crimes are preceded by warning signs such as escalating aggression, social withdrawal, extremist thinking, or emotional instability. Educating communities to recognise these indicators can prevent escalation before harm occurs⁴⁰.

At the institutional level, schools and universities play a crucial role in shaping behavioural norms. Curriculum frameworks should incorporate emotional intelligence training, conflict resolution skills, digital responsibility, and ethical reasoning. When young individuals are taught how to manage anger, cope with rejection, and respond to peer pressure constructively, the likelihood of impulsive or violent responses significantly decreases.

Public awareness campaigns are equally important. Media literacy programs can help individuals critically evaluate sensationalised content, misinformation, and narratives that glorify aggression⁴¹. In a digital age where violent imagery and extreme ideologies spread rapidly, citizens must be equipped to question and analyse rather than absorb and imitate.

Workplace education is another essential dimension. Corporate ethics training, whistleblower protections, and transparent accountability mechanisms reduce the risk of collective misconduct. Employees who understand ethical boundaries and feel secure reporting wrongdoing are less likely to become passive participants in systemic crimes.

The broader social implication of awareness-based prevention is the creation of an informed

³⁹ World Health Organization, *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002).

⁴⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Crime Prevention Guidelines* (2010).

⁴¹ George Gerbner, "Cultivation Theory" (1969).

citizenry capable of recognising manipulation, resisting harmful influence, and intervening constructively.

Strengthening Moral Reasoning

Beyond awareness lies the deeper task of strengthening moral reasoning. Moral development is not automatic; it evolves through guided reflection, dialogue, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Societies that encourage critical thinking rather than blind conformity cultivate individuals who question harmful norms instead of following them unquestioningly⁴².

Educational systems must prioritise ethical discourse. Debates, case studies, and real-world problem-solving exercises help individuals practice moral judgment in complex situations. When people are encouraged to analyse dilemmas involving loyalty, authority, and personal gain, they develop the cognitive tools necessary to resist unethical pressure.

Family structures also contribute significantly to moral development. Open communication, consistent boundaries, and modelling of empathy reinforce internal moral standards. Children who observe fair conflict resolution and accountability within the household are more likely to internalise those values.

Religious and community institutions can further reinforce moral accountability by promoting compassion, respect for human dignity, and social responsibility. However, moral education must avoid dogmatism. Genuine moral strength arises from understanding principles, not merely obeying rules.

The social implication of enhanced moral reasoning is a reduction in reactive decision making. Individuals who possess strong ethical frameworks are better equipped to withstand provocation, peer pressure, and institutional coercion.

Policy Interventions

Preventive strategies must extend beyond individual reform to structural change. Policy interventions address systemic factors that create fertile ground for crime⁴³.

⁴² Lawrence Kohlberg, *Stages of Moral Development* (1958).

⁴³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (1999).

Socio economic reforms are central. Access to quality education, stable employment opportunities, affordable housing, and healthcare reduces chronic stress and desperation. When individuals perceive legitimate pathways for growth and mobility, the temptation to engage in unlawful alternatives diminishes.

Criminal justice reforms also play a preventive role. Transparent policing, community engagement initiatives, and trust building between citizens and law enforcement reduce alienation and resentment. Excessively punitive systems that ignore rehabilitation often reinforce cycles of reoffending, whereas balanced approaches that combine accountability with reintegration are more sustainable.

Regulation of digital spaces is another modern policy priority. Governments must develop frameworks that address online radicalisation, cyberbullying, and misinformation without undermining freedom of expression. Responsible content moderation and digital literacy partnerships can mitigate the rapid spread of harmful narratives.

Workplace regulation is equally important. Strong compliance systems, independent oversight bodies, and anti-corruption mechanisms reduce the likelihood of institutional crimes. Policies that protect dissent and encourage ethical reporting create environments where wrongdoing is challenged early rather than concealed.

The broader social implication of effective policy intervention is structural fairness. When institutions operate transparently and equitably, public trust strengthens, and collective stability increases.

Psychological Counselling and Rehabilitation

Prevention also requires addressing emotional and psychological vulnerabilities. Accessible mental health services can identify risk factors such as unmanaged anger, trauma, depression, or obsessive thinking before they manifest in harmful behaviour⁴⁴.

Early counselling in schools can help children process adverse experiences constructively. Community mental health programs provide safe spaces for individuals facing stress, addiction, or interpersonal conflict. Destigmatising therapy encourages people to seek help

⁴⁴ World Health Organization, *Mental Health Action Plan* (2013).

without fear of judgment.

For offenders, rehabilitation must focus on behavioural reform rather than mere punishment. Cognitive behavioural therapy, anger management programs, and empathy development workshops have shown effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Structured reintegration programs that provide vocational training and social support reduce the likelihood of relapse into criminal conduct.⁴⁵

Restorative justice practices also offer promising outcomes. By facilitating dialogue between offenders and victims, these models promote accountability, remorse, and social healing. Rehabilitation grounded in dignity and responsibility fosters long term behavioural transformation.

The social implication of prioritising psychological support is the recognition that prevention is more humane and cost effective than reactionary punishment. Investing in mental health strengthens societal resilience.

Conclusion

The inquiry into why ordinary individuals commit extraordinary crimes reveals that criminal behaviour cannot be adequately explained through simplistic notions of inherent deviance or moral deficiency. Rather, it emerges from a dynamic interaction between individual psychology, situational pressures, social structures, and, at times, biological predispositions. The boundaries between conformity and transgression are far more fluid than traditionally assumed, shaped by context, perception, and the conditions under which decisions are made.

The analysis demonstrates that human behaviour is deeply responsive to external influences such as authority, group dynamics, socio-economic stress, and cultural conditioning, as well as internal factors including emotion, cognition, and moral reasoning. Legal principles acknowledge this complexity by assessing not only the act but also the mental state, intention, and surrounding circumstances, thereby attempting to balance accountability with fairness. At the same time, philosophical debates on free will and moral responsibility underscore that, despite these influences, individuals retain the capacity for choice and ethical judgment.

⁴⁵ Mark Lipsey, "The Primary Factors that Characterize Effective Interventions" (2009); Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (2002).

Importantly, this study highlights that extraordinary crimes are not always the result of extraordinary individuals, but often of ordinary people placed in extraordinary situations. This recognition shifts the focus from merely identifying and punishing offenders to understanding and addressing the conditions that facilitate such behaviour. It calls for a more nuanced approach that integrates prevention, education, institutional reform, and psychological support.

Ultimately, a just and effective response to crime lies in acknowledging both human vulnerability and moral agency. By strengthening ethical awareness, promoting social equity, and fostering resilient institutions, society can reduce the likelihood of harmful conduct while upholding the principles of justice and accountability.

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