
PSYCHOLOGY AS A TOOL TO UNDERSTAND CRIMES

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ABSTRACT

Crime in itself is a complex concept to understand. It involves various components that are interdependent. Criminals are often out casted from the common people living in a society. However, it is important to understand the root causes of humans turning into criminals by disregarding basic human tendencies like empathy and morality.

This paper aims to analyze such causes through the lens of psychology as a discipline. Psychology, the study of the human mind, studies different behaviours showcased by individuals. Personality, a subtopic that falls under the study of psychology, can be instrumental in understanding the behavioural complexities showcased by the offenders and all possible reasons that led to such behaviour among them. This paper explains certain theories by Sigmund Freud, a widely recognised psychologist and Karen Horney, a Neo-Freudian. Sigmund Freud's idea of the 'structure of personality' and Karen Horney's theory of 'basic anxiety' among children are analysed in the paper. Emphasis has been laid on the early life, mainly childhood, of the offenders who commit heinous crimes and how parents play a major role in building a child's outlook towards life. The research paper also includes a case study of Jeffery Dahmer, an American serial killer stressing on his early childhood conditions that later shaped him into a criminal, merciless yet calm.

Keywords: Crime, psychology, Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, personality, Jeffery Dahmer

I. INTRODUCTION

India, as a country stands witness to increasing number of crimes nationwide. Renowned newspapers all over India have their headlines highlighting various crimes unfortunately most of them being grievous. There are various punishments provided in law for such crimes however there must be a required analysis for the root cause behind the execution of crimes. To fulfill such requirement psychology as a subject can emerge as a tool to decode the causes or human tendencies that lead to such crimes. Each individual committing a crime has his own unique personality, referring to an individual's unique and relatively stable patterns of behavior, thoughts and feelings which are studied in detail under the subject of psychology.

Law does not define 'crime' as a term under any specific section. Indian Penal Code defines 'offences' as an act or omission that is punishable by law¹.

Psychology, as a discipline is defined as a scientific study of mind and behavior. Eminent psychologists share their interpretation of definition of psychology. William Wundt defines psychology as 'science of conscious experience' while John B Watson defines psychology as the emphasized study of overt behavior.

Psychology, studies human's activities and aims to analyze the cause of such actions or series of behavior expressed by it. Psychology involves the scientific study of different theories promulgated by various thinkers. In case of criminals, the psychoanalysis system of Sigmund Freud is instrumental in understanding the criminal tendencies in humans and their mindset.

II. PSYCHOANALYSIS SYSTEM

Psychoanalysis is was a system introduced by Sigmund Freud. Sigmund Freud introduced the 'World of Unconscious' he believed that there is more to the mind other than consciousness. The conscious holds only a part of our mental life, there is an even stronger force underlying behavior called the unconscious. This vast part of unconscious remains hidden which contains all the repressed wishes, desires, feelings, drives and motives often related to aggression.

Sigmund Freud gave great importance to the long forgotten or repressed childhood experiences for the determination of many problems of adult behavior. He put forward an unusual method

¹ S.40, The Indian Penal Code, 1860, Act no. 45 of 1860.

known as the psychoanalytic method for the solution of the behavioral problems. This method involves the process of analyzing the unconscious behavior.

Sigmund Freud's theory of personality involved 'Levels of Consciousness' and 'Structure of Personality'. He believed that human mind has three distinct levels: conscious, preconscious and unconscious. Conscious level includes our current thoughts. Beneath the conscious lies a larger preconscious level. These include memories that are not a part of the current thoughts but can readily be brought to mind if the need arises. Beneath the preconscious lies a major chunk of human mind, the unconscious. Freud believed that the unconscious held repressed thoughts and feelings that were driven from conscious to unconscious as they were too anxiety provoking. We are not aware of our unconscious thoughts but they actively affect our behavior.²

Freud further gives a structure of personality involving id, ego and superego. This structure of personality governs the levels of human mind. Id, present at the unconscious level includes all the primitive innate urges. These include various bodily needs and aggressive impulses. Id lies completely in unconscious and operates on the pleasure principle. It requires immediate gratification and is not capable of considering the consequences of the act done in order to achieve gratification.

Most of these urges of id are socially unacceptable hence ego develops. Ego governs the conscious, its task is to hold id in check until the conditions allow for the satisfaction of the impulses. Ego works in the reality principle and takes into account external conditions and consequences of all the actions and directs behavior to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

The final aspect includes the superego. It too controls the id impulses and is concerned with morality evaluating whether the various ways to satisfy id impulses are right or wrong. Superego permits gratification only when it is morally right.

Id as defined by Freud involves primitive needs and their immediate gratification irrespective of them being socially unacceptable or those having harsh consequences. These are controlled by ego and superego which provide favorable conditions for gratification. However, sometimes ego and superego get distorted in their functioning resulting the over dominance of id. When id overpowers if fulfils the impulses immediately, which can cause an individual's overt

² Robert A. Baron & Girishwar Mishra, *Psychology Indian Subcontinent Edition* 393 (5th ed. 2016).

behavior becoming socially disregarded and not in line with social norms. Excessive dominance of id therefore leads to acts that society deems as crimes.

NEO- FREUDIANS' VIEW

Sigmund Freud's theories were appreciated for providing a new outlook to traditional psychology. However, there were many scientists who did not agree with the ideas promulgated by Sigmund Freud. Karen Horney stated that distorted personality and psychological disorders can occur due to disturbed interpersonal relationship during childhood which she termed as basic anxiety- child's fear of being left alone, helpless and insecure. In reaction to such excessive levels of anxiety that emerge from poor relationship between parents and children, children adopt one of the three styles: a passive aggressive, wherein they try to cope by being agreeable, aggressive style wherein they fight to get attention, withdrawn style, in which they repress their emotions. All of these patterns can lead to serious psychological disorders³.

Aggressive patterns when get severe can cause a child to become extremely short tempered and can cross any limits to gain attention. For instance, a child stabbing its younger sibling just to get the mother's attention.

III. CASE STUDY

THE CASE OF JEFFERY DAHMER

Jeffery Dahmer, an infamous serial killer from America was a murderer in 1970s. His murders involved necrophilia, cannibalism and preservation of their body parts. Although he was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, he was found to be behaving sane during his trial like other individuals would behave when put through a trial. Dahmer's odd fantasies find their roots in his childhood wherein he was completely ignored by his parents. His father mostly stayed away from home and his mother was a hypochondriac and suffered from depression. There were constant fights in the family and little Jeffery found no comfort at home. Around the age of four Jeffery found great interest in dead bodies of animals and bugs and would enjoy rides with his father to catch small bugs. His father thought it was some temporary sport for Jeffery but in reality it became his fascination and he would dissect them for enjoyment. He became an addict of alcohol by the age of fourteen and would often be intoxicated while in

³ Robert A. Baron & Girishwar Mishra, *Psychology Indian Subcontinent* Edition 401 (5th ed. 2016).

school. During puberty Jeffery discovered his interests were inclined more towards boys rather than girls, he was a gay. He started developing sexual fantasies but they were intertwined with his pleasure of dissecting bodies. He wanted to take full dominance over his partners to an extent of dissecting them as a means of arousal. His parents had a divorced when Jeffery was around eighteen. It was during this period that he committed his first murder, murder of Steven Hicks. Since then Jeffery enjoyed the act of gaining control, murdering his victims and mutilating their body parts.

During his trial, his lawyers claimed that Jeffery was psychologically ill. This claim was denied by various psychologists but few supported the layers' claims. Psychiatrist George Palermo stated that Jeffery committed such crimes in a way of projecting his inner anger that he had for himself so he killed the victims in order to end the source of his homosexuality, by killing them he killed the quality he hated in himself. George also stated that Jeffery had severe mixed personality disorders.

Samuel Friedman, a clinical psychologist claimed that Jeffery had a longing for companionship as he had suffered from abandonment since his birth.

He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Jeffery had committed heinous crimes but they could have been avoided if he had been given a healthy environment in his childhood. Staying under constant anxiety and family conflicts he sought comfort in dead animals. He mutilated them and enjoyed the activity as it led him to feel relieved from his inner turmoil.

As stated there have been many instances where psychological reasons like trauma experienced during childhood can cause a person to develop a distorted view of morality however we cannot understand causes of crime solely with the help of psychology. Psychology is discussed as a branch of science to decode the thinking of some psychopath offenders whose crimes were too inhumane for the world to understand. Mere punishment is less for such inhumane crimes therefore it becomes necessary to understand the outlook such individuals had that induced them to commit such crimes.