
BEYOND MOTIVE: MORAL DISENGAGEMENT, REMORSE, AND WHAT REAL REFORM REQUIRES

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of crime often begin by identifying an offender's motive. Financial gain, anger, revenge, jealousy, personal pressure, or difficult circumstances are commonly used to explain why an offence took place. While motive helps explain what an offender wanted, it does not explain how the offender came to see harmful behaviour as acceptable. This article argues that understanding serious offending requires moving beyond motive to examine moral disengagement, remorse, empathy, and evidence based rehabilitation. Drawing on existing research in criminal psychology and offender rehabilitation, the article explains how offenders may justify harmful actions by minimising the consequences, shifting responsibility, blaming victims, or changing the way they think about their behaviour. It also distinguishes guilt, shame, regret, and remorse, arguing that these emotional responses should not be treated as identical. The article further examines why empathy, although important, cannot by itself demonstrate rehabilitation or predict future behaviour. Finally, it argues that genuine reform should not be assessed through apologies or emotional expression alone. Instead, it should be evaluated through responsibility taking, cognitive change, behavioural consistency, victim awareness, and measurable reduction in future risk. Understanding the psychology of offending does not weaken accountability. Rather, it helps criminal justice systems make more informed decisions while protecting victims, supporting rehabilitation where appropriate, and reducing the likelihood of future offending.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, offender rehabilitation, remorse, empathy, criminal justice, risk assessment, offender psychology, accountability, behavioural change, desistance.

Introduction

Motive is often treated as the psychological key to understanding crime. Once an offender's motive is identified, whether it is financial gain, anger, revenge, jealousy, personal pressure, or desperation, the offence appears to have been explained. While motive is an important part of understanding criminal behaviour, it answers only one question. It explains what an offender may have wanted to achieve, but it does not explain how the offender became willing to cause harm in order to achieve it. Many people experience financial hardship, rejection, humiliation, or emotional conflict without committing crimes. The more difficult question, therefore, is not simply why an offender wanted something, but how the offender came to see harmful behaviour as acceptable.

This gap cannot be explained by motive alone. Between the desire to commit an offence and the act itself lies a psychological process that allows individuals to reduce feelings of guilt, minimise the seriousness of their actions, or shift responsibility onto someone else. Rather than viewing themselves as people who have caused harm, offenders may gradually convince themselves that their actions were necessary, justified, or not as serious as they actually were. This process has been described as moral disengagement and forms an important part of understanding serious offending because it explains how ordinary moral restraints can become weakened without completely disappearing (Bandura, 1999).

Looking at crime only through motive also creates problems for rehabilitation. If criminal behaviour is explained only by anger, greed, or difficult circumstances, then rehabilitation may focus only on changing those external conditions. However, if offenders continue to justify their actions, deny responsibility, or minimise the harm they have caused, the thinking that supported the offence may remain unchanged. In such situations, punishment alone may not reduce the likelihood of future offending because the underlying beliefs that allowed the offence to occur have not been challenged.

Another difficulty is that emotional responses after an offence are often misunderstood. Expressions such as guilt, shame, regret, and remorse are frequently treated as though they mean the same thing, even though they describe different psychological experiences. Likewise, empathy is often presented as if it is a complete solution to offending. While these concepts are important, none of them alone provides reliable evidence that an offender has genuinely changed. A person may apologise without accepting responsibility, express regret only because

they were caught, or display empathy without showing any lasting change in behaviour. This makes it necessary to distinguish emotional expression from genuine rehabilitation.

For criminal justice systems, this distinction is particularly important. Decisions about sentencing, parole, treatment, and rehabilitation should not depend only on how remorseful or emotional an offender appears. Instead, they should consider whether the offender has accepted responsibility, challenged offence supporting beliefs, demonstrated consistent behavioural change, and reduced the factors that increase the risk of future offending. Understanding these psychological processes does not weaken accountability. On the contrary, it provides a stronger basis for deciding when rehabilitation is meaningful and when it remains only a claim.

This article argues that understanding serious offending requires moving beyond motive alone. It examines how moral disengagement allows offenders to justify harmful behaviour, why guilt, shame, regret, and remorse should be carefully distinguished, why empathy has important limitations, and why genuine reform should be assessed through responsibility taking, cognitive change, behavioural consistency, and measurable risk reduction rather than emotional expression alone. By bringing these ideas together, the article develops a more structured framework for understanding offender rehabilitation while keeping accountability and public safety at its centre.

Research Question and Aim of the Article

This article asks the following question.

How can criminal justice and rehabilitation systems distinguish moral disengagement, genuine remorse, empathy limits, and realistic reform in serious offenders without confusing verbal regret with meaningful behavioural change?

The aim of this article is to develop a structured understanding of offender rehabilitation by moving beyond motive alone. It examines how moral disengagement allows offenders to justify harmful behaviour, why guilt, shame, regret, and remorse should be understood as different psychological responses, why empathy has important limitations, and why genuine reform should be assessed through responsibility taking, behavioural consistency, and reduced risk rather than emotional expression alone. By bringing these ideas together, the article argues that understanding offender psychology strengthens accountability instead of weakening it.

Methodological Note

This article is a conceptual review based on existing academic literature. It does not include original interviews, offender case studies, prison observations, or empirical field research. Instead, it brings together published research on moral disengagement, remorse, empathy, offender rehabilitation, and risk assessment to develop a clearer framework for understanding what meaningful reform should require. The purpose is not to excuse criminal behaviour or reduce personal responsibility. Instead, it is to explain why rehabilitation should be evaluated through evidence of cognitive change, responsibility taking, behavioural consistency.

Motive, Moral Permission, and Offender Self Justification

Motive is one of the most common ways of explaining criminal behaviour. In criminal investigations, media discussions, and public opinion, offences are often understood through questions about what the offender wanted. Financial gain, anger, revenge, jealousy, humiliation, addiction, desperation, or social pressure are frequently used as explanations for why a crime occurred. Motive is important because it helps identify the desire, pressure, or grievance that made the offence attractive to the offender. However, motive alone does not explain why some individuals act on those desires through harmful behaviour while many others do not.

This distinction is important because difficult emotions and pressures are common human experiences. Many people experience rejection, financial stress, conflict, or humiliation without committing offences. A person may feel intense anger without becoming violent, or financial pressure without committing fraud or theft. Motive therefore explains only part of the process. It identifies what the offender wanted, but it does not explain how the offender became willing to harm another person in order to achieve it.

For this reason, offender psychology cannot stop at motive alone. A second question becomes necessary. How did the offender make the harmful act psychologically acceptable to themselves. This is where the concept of moral permission becomes important. Moral permission refers to the cognitive process through which individuals weaken feelings of guilt, reduce personal responsibility, or reframe harmful behaviour in ways that make offending easier to justify. Rather than abandoning morality completely, offenders may slowly adjust how they think about their actions so that the offence no longer feels entirely wrong.

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement is particularly important in explaining this process (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement does not mean the absence of conscience. Instead, it refers to the selective disabling of self condemnation. Individuals continue to understand social rules and moral standards, but they create justifications that allow them to separate those standards from their own behaviour. Through these justifications, harmful conduct becomes easier to perform without experiencing the same level of guilt or personal responsibility.

This distinction between motive and moral disengagement is central to understanding serious offending. Motive answers the question of what the offender wanted. Moral disengagement answers the question of how the offender allowed themselves to pursue it through harm. A person may have a motive without offending, but offending becomes more likely when the individual also develops explanations that weaken moral restraint. In this sense, moral disengagement acts as a bridge between desire and harmful action.

Offender self justification can take many forms. A fraud offender may describe victims as greedy people who deserved to lose money. A violent offender may describe assault as teaching someone respect rather than causing harm. A domestic abuser may present controlling behaviour as discipline or protection. A corrupt official may justify bribery by arguing that corruption is simply how the system works. In each of these examples, the offender changes the meaning of the behaviour in order to reduce guilt and preserve a more acceptable self image.

This process also helps explain why punishment alone may fail to prevent repeated offending. If offenders continue to see themselves as justified, misunderstood, or unfairly treated, punishment may be interpreted as bad luck rather than accountability. The external consequence may be experienced, but the internal beliefs that supported the offence remain unchanged. This is one reason why rehabilitation must address offence supportive thinking rather than focusing only on emotional expression or punishment.

Research on incarcerated offenders has linked moral disengagement with antisocial traits, distorted thinking patterns, and offence supportive cognition. Studies involving adolescent offenders have also suggested that higher levels of empathy are associated with lower levels of moral disengagement, although the relationship is not simple or absolute. These findings suggest that serious offending involves not only external pressures but also internal systems of justification that allow harmful behaviour to become psychologically manageable.

Understanding moral disengagement does not excuse criminal behaviour. Explaining how offenders justify harm is different from defending the harm itself. In fact, examining these processes strengthens accountability because it identifies the beliefs and reasoning patterns that rehabilitation must confront. If those patterns remain unchanged, the likelihood of repeated offending may remain high even after punishment has been imposed. For this reason, understanding moral permission is not a soft approach to crime. It is a necessary part of understanding how serious offending develops and what meaningful reform should require.

Bandura's Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Albert Bandura's theory of moral disengagement explains that people do not usually abandon their moral values before committing harmful acts. Instead, they gradually change the way they think about their behaviour so that the act feels more acceptable. Rather than seeing themselves as bad people, they develop explanations that reduce guilt and allow them to maintain a positive image of themselves. These mental processes are known as mechanisms of moral disengagement. They do not remove responsibility, but they help explain how responsibility can become weakened in the offender's own mind (Bandura, 1999).

One of the most common mechanisms is **moral justification**. Here, harmful behaviour is presented as serving a good or necessary purpose. An offender may believe that violence was needed to protect honour, that fraud was necessary to support a family, or that revenge was justified because they had been treated unfairly. The harmful act is no longer viewed as wrong but as something that was necessary under the circumstances.

Another mechanism is **euphemistic language**. The words used to describe the offence are changed so that the behaviour sounds less serious. Instead of saying they assaulted someone, an offender may say they "lost control" or that it was "just a fight." Financial crimes may be described as "borrowing money" instead of theft or fraud. Changing the language does not change the behaviour, but it changes how the offender thinks about it.

Advantageous comparison is another way offenders reduce feelings of guilt. Instead of judging their actions on their own, they compare them with something they believe is much worse. Someone convicted of assault may argue that at least they did not kill anyone. A fraud offender may claim that they only stole a small amount compared to others who committed larger financial crimes. These comparisons make the offence appear less serious even though

harm has still been caused.

Offenders may also use **displacement of responsibility**. Instead of accepting responsibility for their own actions, they blame someone else or claim they were only following instructions. A person may argue that they committed an offence because of pressure from friends, family members, gang leaders, or employers. Although outside influences may exist, this way of thinking shifts responsibility away from the individual and reduces feelings of personal accountability.

A similar mechanism is **diffusion of responsibility**, where responsibility is shared among several people. An offender may believe that because many people participated, no single individual is fully responsible. This is often seen in organised crime, group violence, or offences committed by several individuals together. When responsibility is spread across a group, personal guilt may become weaker.

Another important mechanism is **distortion or minimisation of consequences**. In this situation, offenders convince themselves that the harm they caused was not very serious. They may believe that the victim recovered quickly, that no lasting damage was done, or that the victim would eventually be fine. By reducing the seriousness of the consequences, offenders reduce the emotional impact of their own behaviour.

Bandura also described **dehumanisation**, where offenders begin to see victims as less deserving of empathy, respect, or dignity. Instead of viewing victims as ordinary people, they may see them as enemies, outsiders, or people who somehow deserved what happened to them. When victims are viewed in this way, causing harm becomes psychologically easier because the emotional connection with the victim is weakened.

The final mechanism is **attribution of blame**. Here, offenders believe that the victim caused the offence through their own behaviour. A victim may be blamed for provoking violence, trusting the wrong person, dressing in a particular way, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. By shifting blame onto the victim, offenders reduce their own sense of responsibility and justify their actions.

Mechanism	How it works	Simple example
Moral justification	Harm is presented as necessary or right	"I had to do it to protect my family."
Euphemistic language	Softer words reduce the seriousness of the act	"It was just a fight."
Advantageous comparison	The offence is compared with something worse	"At least I didn't kill anyone."
Displacement of responsibility	Responsibility is shifted to another person	"I was only following orders."
Diffusion of responsibility	Responsibility is shared with a group	"Everyone else was doing it too."
Distortion of consequences	Harm is minimised	"Nobody was really hurt."
Dehumanisation	Victims are seen as less deserving of empathy	"They deserved what happened."
Attribution of blame	Responsibility is placed on the victim	"They brought it on themselves."

Guilt, Shame, Regret, and Remorse

After an offence has been committed, attention often shifts from why the crime happened to how the offender reacts to it. During court proceedings, rehabilitation programmes, and parole hearings, emotional responses are frequently considered when deciding whether an offender has accepted responsibility or is capable of change. However, this process is more complicated than it appears because emotions such as guilt, shame, regret, and remorse are often used interchangeably even though they describe different psychological experiences. Failing to distinguish between them can lead to incorrect conclusions about an offender's willingness or ability to reform.

Guilt is generally understood as a response to one's own behaviour. A person who experiences guilt recognises that their actions were wrong and may wish they had acted differently. This emotion focuses on the behaviour itself rather than the individual as a person. Guilt can encourage someone to acknowledge responsibility, apologise, or attempt to repair the harm they have caused. However, guilt alone should not be seen as proof of rehabilitation. An

offender may feel guilty because they have been arrested, lost their freedom, or disappointed their family without fully understanding the impact their actions had on the victim. In such situations, guilt may reflect personal consequences rather than genuine accountability.

Shame is different because it is directed towards the self rather than the behaviour. Instead of thinking, "I did something wrong," the individual may think, "I am a bad person." Although this distinction appears small, it can lead to very different outcomes. Shame often encourages withdrawal, denial, or defensiveness because the individual becomes focused on protecting their own identity rather than addressing the harm they have caused. Some offenders may avoid responsibility because admitting wrongdoing threatens how they see themselves. Others may become more concerned with how society views them than with the suffering experienced by the victim. For this reason, shame does not always support rehabilitation and may even become an obstacle to honest self reflection.

Regret is another emotional response that should be distinguished from both guilt and shame. Regret simply means wishing that something had happened differently. An offender may regret committing an offence because of the punishment received, the loss of employment, damage to personal relationships, or the effect the conviction has had on future opportunities. While these feelings may be genuine, they do not necessarily involve recognition of the harm caused to another person. Regret can therefore remain focused on personal loss instead of responsibility.

Remorse goes further than guilt, shame, or regret because it combines emotional recognition with moral responsibility. Genuine remorse involves understanding the harm caused, accepting responsibility without making excuses, and recognising the impact of one's behaviour on the victim and the wider community. It is not simply an emotional reaction but a deeper acknowledgement that another person has suffered because of one's own actions. This is why remorse is often considered important during sentencing, rehabilitation, and parole decisions.

Despite its importance, remorse is one of the most difficult concepts to assess within criminal justice. Emotional expression varies greatly between individuals. Some people naturally express sadness or guilt through visible emotion, while others remain emotionally reserved even when they genuinely accept responsibility. An offender who cries in court may appear remorseful, while another who speaks calmly may be viewed as indifferent. These differences make it dangerous to judge remorse only through outward behaviour.

There is also the possibility that remorse may be performed rather than genuinely experienced. Offenders may understand that apologies, emotional language, or visible regret are viewed positively by judges, parole boards, or rehabilitation professionals. As a result, some individuals may learn how remorse is expected to appear without truly accepting responsibility for their actions. This does not mean that every apology is dishonest, but it does show why emotional displays alone cannot be treated as reliable evidence of rehabilitation.

Because of these difficulties, many researchers argue that remorse should be assessed together with behaviour rather than emotion alone. An offender who consistently accepts responsibility, participates honestly in treatment, challenges offence supporting beliefs, and demonstrates long term behavioural change provides stronger evidence of rehabilitation than someone who simply expresses regret during legal proceedings. Behaviour observed over time is generally more reliable than emotional reactions shown during a single interview or court appearance.

Understanding the differences between guilt, shame, regret, and remorse also has practical importance for criminal justice professionals. Sentencing decisions, treatment programmes, and parole assessments become more accurate when emotional responses are evaluated carefully instead of being accepted at face value. Genuine reform requires more than saying the right words. It requires responsibility, honesty, and a willingness to demonstrate change through consistent behaviour. For this reason, emotional expression should be viewed as only one part of a much broader assessment of rehabilitation rather than as proof that meaningful change has already taken place.

The Performance Problem: Why Apologies and Emotion Are Not Enough

One of the greatest challenges in criminal justice is deciding whether an offender has genuinely changed or has simply learned how to appear changed. Courts, parole boards, psychologists, and rehabilitation professionals are often required to assess an offender's attitude towards the offence, yet this assessment is rarely straightforward. Emotional expressions such as crying, apologising, or speaking about regret may create the impression of remorse, but they do not always provide reliable evidence that meaningful psychological or behavioural change has taken place.

Human emotions are complex and are expressed differently by different people. Some individuals openly express sadness, guilt, or regret, while others remain emotionally reserved

even when they genuinely accept responsibility for their actions. Cultural background, personality, mental health, and communication style can all influence how emotion is displayed. As a result, relying only on visible emotion creates the risk of misunderstanding both offenders who are genuinely trying to change and those who are attempting to create a favourable impression.

At the same time, criminal justice systems must recognise that emotional expression can sometimes become strategic. Offenders often understand that showing remorse may influence sentencing decisions, parole hearings, or participation in rehabilitation programmes. This creates the possibility that apologies, emotional statements, or expressions of regret may be presented because they are expected rather than because they reflect genuine responsibility. An offender who has learned what professionals want to hear may appear cooperative without changing the beliefs that originally supported the offence.

This does not mean that apologies or emotional displays are meaningless. They can be an important first step towards accepting responsibility. However, they should never be treated as the final measure of rehabilitation. A sincere apology has value only when it is supported by consistent behaviour over time. Without behavioural change, emotional expression remains difficult to interpret and may provide an incomplete picture of an offender's progress.

For this reason, rehabilitation professionals increasingly emphasise observable behaviour rather than emotional performance alone. An offender who consistently accepts responsibility, participates honestly in treatment, follows supervision requirements, avoids further offending, and demonstrates changes in thinking provides stronger evidence of rehabilitation than someone who simply expresses regret during interviews or court proceedings. Behaviour observed over months or years is generally a more reliable indicator of change than emotion observed during a single conversation.

Another reason behavioural evidence is important is that genuine change is usually gradual rather than immediate. Rehabilitation is rarely the result of one apology or one emotional moment. It involves recognising offence supporting beliefs, challenging patterns of self justification, developing healthier ways of thinking, improving self control, and accepting responsibility without shifting blame onto others. These changes cannot be measured through words alone because they become meaningful only when they are reflected in everyday behaviour.

This perspective also protects the interests of victims and society. If criminal justice decisions rely too heavily on emotional impressions, there is a risk of overestimating an offender's readiness for release or rehabilitation. On the other hand, dismissing offenders who struggle to express emotion may unfairly overlook genuine efforts to change. A balanced approach therefore requires professionals to examine emotional responses alongside behavioural evidence, treatment participation, accountability, and ongoing risk assessment.

Ultimately, rehabilitation should not be judged by how convincing an offender appears during a single interview. It should be judged by whether the offender has demonstrated sustained responsibility, reduced offence supporting attitudes, and consistent behavioural change over time. Looking beyond emotional performance allows criminal justice systems to make more informed decisions while maintaining accountability and protecting public safety.

Empathy, Responsibility, and What Real Reform Requires

Empathy is often presented as one of the most important qualities in preventing crime and supporting rehabilitation. It allows people to recognise the feelings and experiences of others, making it easier to understand the harm that their actions may cause. Because of this, rehabilitation programmes frequently encourage offenders to develop greater victim awareness and empathy. While empathy certainly has value, research suggests that it should not be treated as the single measure of rehabilitation or as proof that an offender is unlikely to reoffend.

One reason is that empathy itself is difficult to measure. Some offenders may genuinely understand the suffering of victims but continue to struggle with impulsive behaviour, substance abuse, or deeply rooted patterns of offending. Others may learn to describe victims' experiences during treatment without showing meaningful changes in their attitudes or behaviour. At the same time, some individuals who naturally express little emotion may still accept responsibility, follow treatment programmes, and successfully avoid future offending. This shows that empathy is only one part of a much broader picture.

For this reason, rehabilitation should not depend only on whether an offender appears caring or emotionally expressive. Instead, it should focus on whether the individual has challenged offence supporting beliefs, accepted responsibility without making excuses, and demonstrated consistent behavioural change over time. These changes provide stronger evidence of rehabilitation than emotional language or visible displays of regret alone. A person who

continues to justify harmful behaviour, minimise the impact on victims, or blame others is unlikely to have achieved meaningful reform, even if they appear sympathetic during interviews or court proceedings.

This understanding has influenced modern approaches to offender rehabilitation. Rather than assuming that every offender responds to the same intervention, many rehabilitation programmes now focus on identifying the level of risk an offender presents, the factors that contribute to offending behaviour, and the individual's ability to respond to treatment. The aim is not simply to encourage positive emotions but to reduce the likelihood of future offending through structured and evidence based interventions. Programmes that challenge distorted thinking, improve problem solving, strengthen self control, and encourage responsibility taking are generally more effective than approaches that rely only on emotional reflection.

Real reform should therefore be viewed as a gradual process rather than a single event. It is demonstrated through repeated actions rather than promises, apologies, or emotional displays. An offender who consistently accepts responsibility, participates honestly in treatment, complies with supervision, avoids further offending, and continues to make responsible decisions over time provides stronger evidence of change than someone who simply expresses remorse during legal proceedings. Behavioural consistency is a more reliable indicator of rehabilitation than temporary emotional responses.

These ideas also have important implications for criminal justice practice. During sentencing, courts may consider remorse and willingness to change, but these factors should always be assessed carefully alongside the seriousness of the offence, victim impact, and the risk of future harm. Similarly, parole decisions should not depend only on whether an offender appears remorseful. Decision makers should also examine treatment progress, responsibility taking, behavioural records, and structured risk assessments before concluding that rehabilitation has occurred. Rehabilitation programmes themselves should continue to challenge moral disengagement, encourage accountability, and measure progress through observable behavioural change rather than emotional expression alone.

Ultimately, understanding offender psychology should strengthen criminal justice rather than weaken it. Empathy, remorse, and rehabilitation all have an important place within the justice system, but they should never replace accountability or public protection. A balanced approach recognises that meaningful reform is possible for some offenders, yet it also accepts that

genuine rehabilitation must be demonstrated through evidence of responsibility, sustained behavioural change, and reduced risk over time. In this way, criminal justice can remain both fair and evidence based while continuing to protect victims and society.

Conclusion

Understanding serious offending requires looking beyond motive alone. While motive explains what an offender may have wanted to achieve, it does not explain how harmful behaviour became psychologically acceptable. This article has argued that moral disengagement provides an important explanation by showing how offenders may justify harm, minimise its consequences, shift responsibility, or blame victims while still maintaining a positive view of themselves. Recognising these patterns does not excuse offending. Instead, it helps identify the thinking that rehabilitation must challenge if meaningful change is to occur.

The discussion also showed that emotional responses after an offence should be interpreted carefully. Guilt, shame, regret, and remorse are related but distinct experiences, and they should not be treated as evidence of rehabilitation simply because they are expressed. An apology or emotional display may represent genuine responsibility, but it may also reflect personal regret or an attempt to create a favourable impression. For this reason, criminal justice decisions should avoid relying on emotional expression alone when assessing an offender's progress.

Similarly, empathy should be understood as one part of rehabilitation rather than its final goal. Developing empathy may support positive change, but it cannot by itself demonstrate reduced risk or lasting behavioural improvement. Genuine reform requires offenders to accept responsibility, challenge offence supporting beliefs, and demonstrate consistent behavioural change over time. Rehabilitation should therefore be assessed through structured evidence rather than assumptions based on emotion or language.

Ultimately, understanding offender psychology and maintaining accountability should not be viewed as opposing objectives. A criminal justice system that recognises moral disengagement, carefully evaluates remorse, acknowledges the limits of empathy, and focuses on measurable behavioural change is better equipped to protect victims, reduce future offending, and support meaningful rehabilitation where it is genuinely possible. Looking beyond motive does not weaken justice. Instead, it strengthens justice by ensuring that decisions are based on evidence, responsibility, and long-term public safety rather than appearances alone.

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