

## Cognitive Traits of Criminal Motivation

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### Abstract

The cognitive trait of criminal motivation is a characteristic of cognitive function of the criminal in the process of forming the criminal motivation and being governed by it, which is an organic component of the structure of criminal motivation. The research on the cognitive trait of criminal motivation involves three aspects, namely, cognitive factors, mechanisms and components. Fundamental factors of the cognitive dimension for the structure of criminal motivation involve expectations and value cognition, cognitive dissonance, attribution preference, subconscious level of implicit cognition, ability and control, etc. They are embodied in the target value of crime, rationalization of crime, self-efficiency of the criminal, criminal thinking patterns and other specific cognitive components by an active processing way realized by the criminal and an unconsciously automatic processing way.

**Key words:** Criminal motivation; Thinking patterns; Rationalization; Self-efficiency

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### INTRODUCTION

The criminal motivation is an inner cause or a psychological force stimulating and promoting the

criminal to commit a crime. It points at a question: what are the psychological reasons for the criminal to commit a crime? The criminal behaviors extremely challenge and destruct social norms and morals, and most of the criminal behaviors are rationally chosen by the criminal. In the process of the formation of such a criminal psychology, the criminal's dominant and implicit cognitive processes and criminal behaviors have a close relationship with the criminal behaviors. Humans are species with highly developed wisdom and reason. The criminal's behaviors will also be profoundly governed by the cognitive processes. The research on cognitive trait of criminal motivation points at the cognitive factors and specific components of the criminal motivation.

### 1. COGNITIVE FACTORS OF CRIMINAL MOTIVATION

The cognitive factors of the criminal motivation are mainly expectations and value cognition, cognitive dissonance, attribution preference, subconscious level of implicit cognition, ability and control and other factors.

#### 1.1 Expected Value and Criminal Motivation

Expected value theory is to study motivation with an orientation of modern cognition, with the basic concept that the motivation behavior is caused by individual needs and target value obtained from the environment; the probability of behavior not only depends on the target value for the individual, but also on the individual's expectations for the target: the criminal behaviors are usually caused by the doer laying much emphasis on the results of the target value of crime.

#### 1.2 Cognitive Dissonance and Criminal Motivation

Cognitive consistency theory advocates that, during the establishment of criminal motivation by the criminal, on one hand, the conflict and confrontation between the

positive values and attitudes of the subject (such as ethical principle, conscience, legal concepts, integrity personality and traits, etc.) and negative values and attitudes cognition (selfishness, and timely pursuit of happiness, etc.) are related. The criminal motivation may finally give up the positive values and attitudes, or become a product to increase cognitive coordination factors of the subject through “rationalization of crime” (for example, “what I implement is not the criminal behavior” or “the behavior is little harmful”, or “the behavior is free of victims” etc.). On the other hand, only when the internal cognition of the criminal remains relatively consistent (positive attitudes and criminal attitudes reach a compromise), and the criminal’s cognitive is consistent with criminal behaviors and crime target, or the relations between the criminal-crime target, and other criminals-crime target remain similar and balanced, the criminal’s inner cognition can be consistent (or relatively consistent), and the criminal behaviors can become behavior motivation with dominant behavior.

### 1.3 Attribution and Criminal Motivation

Attribution theory advocates that: in the formative factors of the individual criminal motivation, there are mechanisms of subconscious or conscious behavior attribution of the doer. When adolescents encounter negative events (such as poor school record poor, or tense relation with classmates), they tend to the attribution to partial internal factors (such as poor ability, or subjectively insufficient effort) or external attribution (bad luck, too difficult learning tasks), so they are easy to mistakenly believe that (from one examination or students quarrel) their own intelligence or adaptive capacity could not adapt to school life, and cannot meet requirements of their parents and teachers so as to prone to give up under the negative factors or conditions (called “Learned Helplessness”), thus they get a high risk of committing a crime (committing a crime due to disappointment). When the doer has an intense frustration or faces the incentives of specific crime target, by observing negative behavior reinforced by the reward of some wrongdoers (especially fellows with the same situation), the doer is more likely to attribute to a specific crime task. The attribution role of such alternative learning promotes the observer to generate criminal motivation. When the doers defy the law and succeed, they may be pleased with themselves, and involuntarily conduct attribution of inner stability, and feel that their success of the criminal behaviors is caused by their strong abilities and skills, which will greatly enhance their existing criminal motivation. That is, during the forming process and strengthening process of criminal motivation, the attribution bias plays a role in the criminal motivation. Criminals’ common attribution biases include self-serving bias (crime setbacks are attributed to the situation of crime), false consistency effect (other criminals also have the same criminal intent and criminal

emotion), doer-observer bias (stubbornly believe that someone deliberately sets obstacles, or oppose one’s own and produce strong emotions of anger and revenge).

### 1.4 Ability to Control and Criminal Motivation

For the relation between the ability to control and criminal motivation, behavior motivation is often caused by external incentive and pressure, but meeting inner needs is also an important promotion factor to develop intrinsic motivation. A lack of unconditional positive regard leads to the state of individual without a sense of worth, a sense of competence and a sense of control is the state without criminal motivation. Even if there are some deviant and criminal behaviors, they are carried out under the external pressure (such as force and stress from the authority and rules of criminal groups). An external reward or punish of the negative behavior may produce a certain degree of behavior obedience and a sense of self-control, and thus have a different degree of recognition orientation of the criminal behaviors (to commit a crime for the crime target). This instrumental criminal motivation (the criminal motivation is for the direct target of crime) is a typical external criminal motivation. With the elimination of self-reward and self-inhibition of moral for the criminal behaviors, interest and experience of the criminal process gradually become the pursuit of the criminals. When the crime itself makes the criminal feel a sense of intrinsic satisfaction (just like a person with criminal personality, or a criminal with abnormal psychology), the criminal motivation may evolve into an internal motivation. In most cases of the evolution process of motivation, the criminals are unconscious, but the process is objective.

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## 2. COGNITIVE COMPONENTS OF CRIMINAL MOTIVATION

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Specific cognitive components of the criminal motivation are represented as the target value of crime, rationalization of crime, self-efficiency of the criminal, and criminal thinking patterns.

### 2.1 Target Value of Crime: Power of Rational Choice

The target value of crime refers to attraction of the target value of crime on the criminals, which is a criminal motivation generated from the pursuit and expectation on the crime target. It is directly manifested as the pursuit and expectation on the crime target (property, power, status, reputation and mental balance, etc.), and indirectly manifested as attitudes, ideas, beliefs and values toward crime. Under certain circumstances (such as some self-fulfilling criminals with spiritual confrontation, and criminals with abnormal psychology), the target value of crime may point to experience of the process of crime, and the tension, pressure and a strong irritation in the process of crime may be viewed as challenges to ability,

courage, and confidence. The process of crime has its power of target value. The target value of crime is a decisive cognitive component in the cognitive dimension of the structure of criminal motivation, which directly guides and restricts other criminal motivations. Under the mechanism of consistency of the potential criminal's value expectation and cognition, the target value of crime is established through cognitive selection and the stage of role recognition. In the stage of cognitive selection of the target value of crime, the doers select external negative information actively, and internalize (assimilate and adapt) in their own minds into an organic component of the cognition and attitude structure, so the target value is consistent with the criminal behavior. In the stage of role recognition, the criminals construct a role of criminal to adapt to the target value of crime. The micro-mechanism includes "criminal" imitation, identification and self-identity. For example, under the role of a rebellious attitude, adolescents deliberately confront traditional norms, so the established behavior motivation is prone to become a source of criminal motivation. For another example, strong potential ideals for the adolescents to dream of becoming a "hero", "rich man" and "killer" may become a powerful life goal. In case of encountering life frustrations, it is more likely to realize "life goals" in an illegal ethical and legal way. We can see that, the criminal's cognitive selection interacts with role recognition, and jointly act on the establishment of target value of crime through one's own direct experience and indirect experience, as well as subjective expectation, leading the criminals to continually hover in the field of criminal motivation.

## **2.2 Rationalization of Crime: Performance of a Psychological Defense Mechanism**

Rationalization of crime refers to a psychological defense mechanism for the criminals (potential criminals) to remove responsibility, which is also a criminal motivation with typical subconscious characteristics in the cognitive dimension. Rationality of crime means that doers make a "reasonable" explanation for their own illegal and criminal behaviors with specious reasons, and then feel at ease and perform criminal behaviors. That is, the rationalization of crime is to explain the criminal phenomenon as an acceptable mode of existence, or a phenomenon of competition between the social strong and weak, as well as the criminal behaviors. Its essence lies in the exemption of self-condemnation and resisting external condemnation, and maintaining self-esteem. Its manifestations are denying criminal liability (criminal behavior is caused by external force, and the social environment offsets personal liability), denying criminal damage (own action is not harmful to society: stealing something is just for borrowed use, and fighting is just a method to solve problems), denying victims of crime (it emphasizes fault and liability of the victims, and own

aggressive behavior is justified; stealing is because the victim is very rich; the victim first has fault, so the attack is justified), denying the person who blames (considering that the person who criticizes himself is "worse than me", "law-enforcement police is worse than me"), citing higher demands (what I do is not for myself, but for the benefit of others) and devoting to criminal gangs (misconduct is only based on the rules of the gang, and forced to do; one can also gain a lot of benefits and a sense of security from the gang). We can see that, as a subconscious criminal motivation, rationalization of crime plays a role of driving and promoting the criminal behaviors, which may sometimes also appear on the body of normal and abnormal criminals at the level of consciousness. It often appears before implementation of criminal behaviors or after completion of criminal behaviors.

## **2.3 Self-Efficiency of Crime: Role of Implicit Cognition**

Albert Bandura, a famous psychologist advocates in the theory of value and expectations that, when the doers believe that they have the ability to carry out a certain activity (including behavioral expectations and performance expectations), they gain high self-efficiency, and tend to actively implement this activity.

The self-efficiency of crime refers to the self-confidence in the ability and expectations for the criminals to achieve their own crime targets. It is often characterized by the criminal's high and unstable self-confidence and self-esteem. When the criminals have high self-efficiency of crime, they may be confident in the ability to achieve crime targets, and expect to succeed before and during committing a crime; faced with difficulties and setbacks, the criminals can make sustained efforts to achieve the intended crime targets. Generally speaking, occupational criminals, habitual criminals and intelligent criminals have higher self-efficiency of crime. They can effectively plan, organize and implement criminal behaviors. A low self-efficiency of crime may make the criminals lack of confidence in the criminal behaviors; faced with difficulties and setbacks of the crime (or expected crime), they often produce a sense of depression, frustration and failure, thereby reducing the likelihood of success in committing a crime.

Experience of criminals (or potential criminals) (direct and indirect experience), verbal persuasion, physical and emotional state, and other factors affect the formation of self-efficiency of crime. The direct and indirect experience of the criminals not only has successful experience of crime, but also has other failure experiences in their own lives and activities: successful experience and demonstration often enhance the self-efficiency of crime. Incitation, persuasion, interpretation, suggestion and guidance of the criminal phenomena, processes and its means and technologies by the criminals (especially "authority" criminals in the criminal organization) help

criminals overcome their fear and tension, and establish the self-efficiency of crime. The physical and emotional state of the criminals may also affect the self-efficiency of crime: a strong body fitness and stable emotion may propose the self-efficiency of crime; negative and depressed emotion may reduce the self-efficiency of crime. However, an excited emotion (such as a passionate sense of anger and fear) under a certain condition may also lead to a rapid formation of the self-efficiency of (temporary) irrational crimes (just as the generation of the crime of passion and mutant criminal behaviors). In the relations between the crime effectiveness and ability, and confidence, the criminals tend to have one-sidedness of the criminal risk assessment, that is, subjectively estimate a lower criminal risk and expect a higher probability of success in committing a crime. The subjectivity of increasing the crime proceeds and reducing the crime costs is the performance of fundamental bias in the assessment of risk behavior, which is more typically embodied in the criminals with a strong level of target value of crime, rationalization of crime and thinking model of crime. The bias of such a low crime risk assessment tends to be rationally (more objectively) introspected and self-corrected after failure in committing a crime, just as the embodiment of repentance by the corruption criminals, bribery criminals and other positions' criminals after the criminal behaviors being disclosed.

As an important cognitive criminal motivation, the self-efficiency of crime is essentially a psychological mechanism of the criminal's self-regulation system. It not only determines whether the criminal is willing to commit a crime, but also affects the actual effect of the criminal behaviors: namely, the self-efficiency of crime can stimulate the criminal behaviors, and strongly maintain and organize the process of criminal behaviors.

#### **2.4 Criminal Thinking Patterns: Extreme and Typical Cognitive Component**

Criminal thinking pattern is a unique cognitive model to promote the criminal to implement criminal behaviors, and a thinking model with criminal tendencies. As a typical and extreme cognitive component in the criminal motivation, it has a power to directly stimulate criminal behaviors.

Typical representatives in research on criminal thinking patterns are American psychiatrist, S. Yochelson and S. E. Samenow (Criminal Personality, 1976). Such thinking model has the following characteristics: (a) Cognition of isolation and externalization: thinking is lack of internal logic and consistency; seeing problems from an isolated point, seeking a strong sensory stimulation and closed thinking may easily cause a view of "disaster" on the frustration and failure, and may generate the trend in the misattribution to the frustration and failure, extreme cognition and straightforward solution to the plight; for

the criminals, life is like a series of angry reactions. (b) An extreme desire of domination and leadership. There is an unquenchable desire of domination, and pursuit of absolute dominant position; when there is a failure to meet such a dominated need, they may feel that they are defeated. This is an unacceptable insult. (c) The temperament is full of apprehension, and lack of trust in others, but requires others to rely on one's own. (d) Indifferent emotion is a typical self-centered person, who is sometimes sentimental, arrogant and rude. (e) A general level of intelligence. (f) Defect in the moral sense. The performance is regular evasion of moral responsibility, selfishness, failure to consider legal provisions. The criminal thinking pattern is generally embodied in the doer in early years (such as a variety of deviant behavior, and selfish behavior, etc.), but which is obvious and prominent in the crime of abnormal psychology (such as crime of paranoid personality disorder). The combination of this cognitive model and the target value of crime of the criminal often lead to a continuous and vicious enhancement of the criminal's criminal career.

Fundamental factors of the cognitive dimension for the structure of criminal motivation involve in expectations and value cognition, cognitive dissonance, attribution preference, subconscious level of implicit cognition, ability and control etc. The cognitive components are embodied as the target value of crime, rationalization of crime, self-efficiency of the criminal, criminal thinking patterns and other components. Its operating mechanisms include conscious and unconscious patterns, and its range of action involves in normal criminal motivation and abnormal criminal motivation. Meanwhile, the cognition of criminal motivation naturally interacts and cooperates with the biological, acquired and emotional factors of the criminal motivation so as to jointly achieve stimulation and governing function of the criminal behaviors for the criminals.

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