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Crime and Crime Reduction

The importance of group processes

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Edited by Jane L. Wood and
Theresa A. Gannon



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Preface

Having conducted research examining individual criminal activity for a number of years, it has been striking how many offenders refer to the influence that their group affiliations had on their offending careers. Of course, this may simply be a way of justifying their crimes. But for some, it may be a valid argument: research has shown that being a member of a group can influence people to become more criminal than they would if they acted alone (e.g. Bendixen *et al.*, 2006; Klein *et al.*, 2006). So, it seems that there are people who at the individual level, may or may not be especially criminally inclined, yet as group members they create alarm for governments, neighborhoods, and entire social structures. Terrorist groups, street gangs, and organized crime groups are well-known and well-feared entities – justifiably so. And the existence of such groups suggests that there is something dynamic about group membership that amplifies or elicits individual criminal inclinations.

To date, few texts have focused specifically on why group membership is relevant to individual criminal behavior. The purpose of this book is to begin to bridge this gap by presenting the actual and potential influence that group membership has in criminal events and the treatment of offenders. Although an examination of group crime is established in some areas of research, the influence of group membership is yet to be fully synthesized in other forensic topics, and this is reflected in some of our chapters. Our aim is therefore to emphasize the importance that should be given to group membership when considering individual criminal behavior and its treatment.

The book is organized into three parts. In the first part we examine the psychology of groups and group crime. In the first chapter Tendayi Viki and Dominic Abrams set the scene by providing an in-depth examination of the powerful influence that group membership can have on individuals. The authors provide social psychological theoretical and empirical explanations of the compelling and enduring influence that group membership has on our individual thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Thus, this chapter provides an important empirically based backdrop for taking group influences into account when examining individual's criminal activity.

In Chapter 2 we begin to examine specific criminal groups. Jane Wood and Emma Alleyne consider the group processes that underpin street gang membership.

Gang structure, leadership, female membership, and the motivation for joining gangs are examined in turn. The authors provide a critical examination of the ability of existing theories to explain gang membership and speculate on the role that psychological theory and research could play in advancing our understanding of street gangs.

Chapter 3 expands on the concepts raised in Chapter 2 by examining specific psychological influences on the group aggression of street gangs. Eduardo Vasquez, Brian Lickel, and Karen Hennigan consider how group-based aggression as seen in a street gang context may be facilitated by psychological processes such as rumination. The authors speculate how rumination may promote not only inter-gang aggression but also the targeting of innocent individuals without provocation. The chapter evaluates models of displaced aggression and the authors hypothesize the value of considering the ruminative thinking of gang members when tackling gang membership and aggression.

The fourth chapter concludes Part 1 of the book by examining the psychology of group sexual offending. The authors, Leigh Harkins and Louise Dixon, consider the psychological factors that contribute to individuals' involvement in group sexual offenses against children and adults. The chapter evaluates how individual, sociocultural, and situational factors contribute to group sexual offending and examines these in context (e.g. rape committed during war, pedophile organizations, and rape in a fraternity setting). The authors also consider specific factors that promote group sexual offending such as male bonding and discuss the contribution that theories of group behavior can offer to group perpetrated sexual offending.

Part 2 focuses on criminal networks and crime. In Chapter 5 Margaret Wilson, Emma Bradford, and Lucy Lemanski take a critical view of terrorism by examining how terrorist networks emerge from the group influences exerted on individuals. The chapter considers the motivations and benefits that underpin membership of terrorist groups and whether people enter terrorist groups as innocents or as individuals with a cause to address. The authors note how terrorist organizations may be initiated and maintained through subtle psychological influences on individual members and challenge some of the prevailing assumptions regarding motivations to become terrorists.

Vincent Egan and Steven Lock continue the criminal network theme by providing an engaging discussion of organized crime in Chapter 6. The authors define organized crime and describe how it is embedded in criminal activity such as drug and people trafficking. The chapter describes the social context in which organized crime emerges and the social and cultural motivations for its continuance. The authors highlight the importance of organized crime networking, the consequences of organized crime activities, the fluidity and adaptability of organized crime group structure, and the methods that individuals employ to maintain their status in the criminal hierarchy of an organized crime network.

Chapter 7 concludes Part 2 of the book. Marie Griffin, David Pyrooz, and Scott Decker evaluate an international body of research that examines prison gangs. The authors evaluate findings that explain how prison gangs form, their activities,

the interface between prison and street gangs and the impact that such groups have on prisons and prisoners. This chapter concludes by considering the myriad of problems associated with accurately identifying prison gang members and the consequences for prisoners who are identified as such.

In Part 3 we present the final two chapters of the book which focus on the relevance of groups in the treatment of offenders. In Chapter 8 William Marshall, David Burton, and Liam Marshall assess the positive value of group work in achieving treatment goals when treating mental disorders generally and sexual offenders specifically in a clinical setting. The authors point out that group work is considered by some to be more effective than individual therapy. They also highlight how a positive group environment that challenges and supports offenders works to maximize treatment benefits for individuals. The importance of group cohesiveness and group expressiveness are emphasized as essential pre-conditions to facilitate a positive change in offenders that will benefit society by a reduction in offending.

In the final chapter Jo Thakker concludes the book by examining the importance of existing group membership in terms of reducing criminal offending. The chapter contemplates the important role that an individual's group membership (e.g. religious, ethnic, or even group commitment) can have on the success of treatment and rehabilitation. This chapter also highlights that an individual's religious beliefs may be used in treatment as a foundation for rehabilitation as the individual searches for a meaning in his/her life. By discussing these and other potential group membership influences, this chapter provides a critical examination of whether group membership is/should be considered when devising or implementing interventions to prevent future offending and draws the book to a positive and yet thought provoking close.

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The potential influences of groups on individuals in committing crime and in reducing crime are extensive. It is no mean feat to collate and evaluate the complex evidence associated with group influences on offenders. So, we owe a huge debt to all the authors in this book for the time, thought and considerable effort they devoted to producing such thought provoking chapters that are not only so high in quality, but also accessible to all levels of readership. We also owe many thanks to those who have offered support and advice when we needed it most. We would like to thank our own group – the forensic research team for providing such a positive environment in which to work. We would also like to thank our colleagues – from various institutions – who have shaped our thinking on aspects of forensic psychology over the years. Those who spring to mind in specific relation to the ideas that led to the formation of this book are Tony Beech, Scott Decker, Bill Marshall, Tony Ward and the many members of the Eurogang network. Special thanks go to Tara Stebnicky for initially supporting our efforts to get this book off the ground and also Raz, Sharla and Louise at Psychology Press for dealing with the various queries and amendments that we proposed. Finally, we would like to thank our families (Doreen, Lydia, Becca, Sam, and Bobs [JLW]; Jim [TAG]) for their love, friendship and support.

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Part 1

The psychology of groups and group crime

1 The social influence of groups on individuals

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Part of the human experience is having a certain level of self-awareness or a sense of self (Lewis, 1990). Indeed, self-concept is considered a psychological resource that can influence life situations and life outcomes (Byrne, 1996; Harris, 1995; Oyserman, 2004). Historically, a large proportion of research in psychology has examined the role of social influence on the self by focusing almost exclusively on the individual as a unit of analysis (Allport, 1924; Zajonc, 1980). This approach is consistent with the dominant western legal tradition that also focuses on individual accountability via the concepts of *actus rea* and *mens rea* (Hamdani, 2007). However, such an approach often ignores the fact that human beings are also social animals (Brooks, 2011; Aronson, 2003). William James (1890/1950) argued that people's self-concept can be strongly influenced by the various social relationships they have. People may experience shifts in identity depending on the social context and whom they are interacting with (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). Thus, in as much as the self can be thought of as unique, the self is also social in nature.

In fact, the importance of social life to human beings cannot be over-emphasised. Even apparently individualistic concepts such as self-esteem can be viewed through a social lens. Leary and colleagues argue that self-esteem often indicates people's perceptions of how other people view them, reflecting one's perception of their level of social inclusion versus exclusion (Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary *et al.*, 1995; see also Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2004). Further to this, individuals can derive their self-esteem from their group memberships. For example, basking in reflected glory (or BIRGing) is a process through which individuals increase their association with successful groups (e.g. sports teams; Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). It is also important to note that it is not only physically present groups that can exert their influence. Individuals act on the basis of their group membership even when other group members are absent (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Group membership plays an important role in criminal behavior. Several examples of this can be cited including religion-based terrorism (Taylor & Louis, 2004 – see also Wilson *et al.*, Chapter 2), gang membership (Wood & Alleyne, 2010), football violence (Stott *et al.*, 2006) and deviant sub-cultures (Holt, 2010). Social norms also prescribe how serious certain crimes are perceived to be, and how people should respond to certain types of criminals. This is reflected, for example, in social attitudes towards acquaintance rape (Abrams *et al.*, 2003),

compared to social attitudes toward paedophilia (Sample & Bray, 2006). In this chapter, we will explore the influence that groups have on individual behavior. We present theoretical arguments and empirical evidence concerning important psychological processes through which groups affect individual behavior (i.e. social categorization). Understanding such processes can provide a context for further examining how group membership can influence criminal activity. In this regard, our goal is to provide the theoretical and empirical backdrop to the rest of the chapters in this book.

Accounts of groups as overarching individuals

At one theoretical extreme, there are researchers who argue that the group supersedes the individual (e.g. Wundt, 1916). According to these researchers social phenomenon such as religion, language and customs cannot be understood through the analysis of the thoughts and beliefs of individuals. Durkheim (1898) argued that social forces or social facts have a life of their own that overrides individual members of society. Furthermore, such social phenomena are not the same as individual attitudes or beliefs and cannot be understood as an aggregate of individual attitudes.

Similar arguments have also been proposed in some criminological theorizing on the social factors that cause criminal behavior. The dominant theories here include cultural deviance theories (Shaw & McKay, 1942), strain theories (Merton, 1938) and theories of social disorganization (Thrasher, 1927). According to these theories criminal behavior emerges as a result of powerful social factors. For example, Thrasher (1927) argued that economic instability leads to *social disorganization*, which then leads to a breakdown in social institutions (e.g. church, family and schools). Such a breakdown then results in a weakening of the institutions that control social behavior and a subsequent increase in criminality. However, these criminological theories describe social forces that result in criminal behavior without directly considering the psychology of the individual actors in this context (see Wood & Alleyne, 2010 for a review). Although it may be the case that certain social factors increase the likelihood of criminal behavior, these factors do not *necessarily* result in criminality (Carroll *et al.*, 2001).

There is no denying the powerful effects of groups on individuals. The conformity experiments of Solomon Asch provide a powerful example of this (Asch, 1951). However, it is important to explore the psychological processes through which group membership influences individual behavior. Such an exploration is not similar to the denial or neglect of the social group that is found in some psychological research and theorizing (e.g. Allport, 1924). Rather, it is a synthesis that recognizes that people have both personal and social identities (Turner *et al.*, 1994). What is important is to examine when, why and how social identities come to influence individual action. The remainder of this chapter will focus on this question by examining theoretical approaches and empirical evidence.