

CRIME

IN A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

FROM CAREER CRIMINALS

TO CRIMINAL CAREERS

GLENN D. WALTERS



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Preface

This book is the third iteration in a series of three works designed to construct a meaningful and useful theory of criminal behavior. The first iteration occurred over two decades ago with publication of *The Criminal Lifestyle* (Walters, 1990), and the second iteration took place 12 years later with publication of *Criminal Belief Systems* (Walters, 2002). This new book is entitled *Crime in a Psychological Context*, and its purpose is to offer a more compelling exposition of crime than was possible in the first two iterations, in part by showing how the criminal lifestyle is capable of integrating two seemingly incompatible crime paradigms: (1) the career criminal paradigm and (2) the criminal career paradigm.

A working hypothesis was the title of the opening chapter of *The Criminal Lifestyle* and in concert with this sentiment, all future iterations of the criminal lifestyle have taken as their principal function the alteration, clarification, and refinement of ideas, principles, and concepts introduced in *The Criminal Lifestyle*. This first iteration emphasized the role of cognition and behavior in the formation of chronic antisocial behavior, defined the lifestyle, and discussed the interactive and thinking styles that characterize the lifestyle. Some of the assessment devices and intervention strategies used with a criminal lifestyle were also discussed during this opening iteration.

In *Criminal Belief Systems*, the second of three iterations in this series, a number of refinements were made. First, the conceptual roots of the criminal lifestyle were more clearly laid out than they had been previously. Second, the developmental model was altered to bring it into line with general lifestyle theorizing (Walters, 2000a, 2000b). Third, assessment of the eight thinking styles first described in *The Criminal Lifestyle* was enhanced with introduction of the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS) (Walters, 1995a). Fourth, a more integrated program of intervention was outlined based on a synthesis of group and individual strategies.

In this book, *Crime in a Psychological Context*, the most recent iteration of the criminal lifestyle construct, the theory has been refined further.

Prominent among these refinements are locating the criminal lifestyle in latent structure space, describing the means by which the primary dimensions of a criminal lifestyle can be assessed, explaining the etiological roots and hierarchical nature of a criminal lifestyle, outlining the parameters of an evidence-based program of intervention, and using important developmental issues to construct an effective program of secondary crime prevention. Finally, this new book gives the criminal lifestyle a decided psychological focus in contrast to the mixed criminological–psychological focus the theory had during its first two iterations. This work covers latent crime-related constructs such as psychopathy, antisocial personality disorder, and criminal lifestyle.

Other features of this book include chapter-opening cases that are referenced throughout the chapter to help illustrate the content being discussed and a list of key terms and concepts at the end of the chapter for easy review. Each chapter ends with a conclusion section that provides further evaluation and context for the chapter material.

As the reader makes his or her way through this book, he or she will hopefully come to appreciate the importance and necessity of the changes that have been made to the criminal lifestyle construct in this third iteration. From proactive and reactive criminal thinking to the retooling of existential fear to accommodate fearlessness, the changes and alterations that have been made to the theory are considered essential to its continued viability as a theory of crime. My intent in making these changes has always been to make the theory easier to understand and apply in both academic and practical settings. This, after all, is the nature of a working hypothesis.

About the Author

Glenn D. Walters received his PhD at Texas Tech University in 1982 with a concentration in counseling psychology and a minor in neuroscience. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses at The Pennsylvania State University Schuylkill campus and Lehigh University and is also employed as a psychologist in a correctional setting. In addition to Introduction to Forensic Psychology, he teaches Abnormal Psychology, Psychological Assessment, Criminology, and Developmental Psychology. He has written two other books with SAGE: *Drugs & Crime in Lifestyle Perspective* and *The Criminal Lifestyle: Patterns of Serious Criminal Conduct*. The present book is an outgrowth of the author's experiences teaching forensic psychology and criminology courses and the realization that criminal behavior is better understood once students appreciate the context in which criminal behavior takes place.

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1

Understanding Crime

The Prime Context

Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881)

Predator

Pete is a 40-year-old single black male serving a 12-year sentence for bank robbery. The only child of an unwed teenage mother, he spent the first 6 years of his life bouncing back and forth between the home of his maternal grandparents and the home of a great aunt who had previously adopted and raised Pete's mother. The great aunt's home was more prosperous than the grandparents' home, and Pete perceived resentment from the relatives who lived with his grandparents full-time. He states that his two adolescent uncles bullied him regularly, often pinning him to the floor to the point where he could not breathe. Pete adds that there was a vague sexual component to his uncles' tormenting, and he openly acknowledges entering into an incestuous relationship with his adolescent aunt. When he was 6 years old, Pete and his mother left the rural area where his great aunt and maternal grandparents lived and moved to a large urban area several hours away. One of his most enduring memories is of his mother inviting strange men into

their home and having sex with them in the room next to his. Pete relates that these episodes, like the experiences he had with his adolescent aunt and uncles, both terrified and excited him.

Pete was first arrested at the age of 12 for stabbing another juvenile with an ice pick during an argument. He admits that he and his friends often spoke about the possibility of doing something like this and the opportunity finally presented itself. From this point forward, Pete was repeatedly in trouble with the law. Protected by his mother who would shuttle him from one residence to another to keep him out of the hands of the authorities, Pete failed to learn from his mistakes because he rarely faced the consequences of his actions. The authorities eventually caught up with him, and he was sent to Job Corps at age 16 and then to an adult prison at age 17. Pete admits that he feels more comfortable in jail and prison than he does on the streets, a sentiment supported by his criminal record, which lists prior convictions for burglary, larceny, robbery, and kidnapping. Consequently, Pete has spent 19 of the last 21 years in prison in six different states. Pete is quick to point out that each time he is released from prison he hopes that things will magically work themselves out. They never do, and within several months he finds himself back in jail. In fact, he has never been on the streets longer than 6 months at a stretch since the age of 17.

Pete is driven by fantasies of ultimate interpersonal control. He states that his greatest fantasy is to have a subterranean complex of rooms where he can indulge in fantasies of unlimited power and control. He is particularly interested in women who are vulnerable and states that when he was on the streets he used drugs, in part, to gain access to female drug users whom he found pliable and more than willing to satisfy his sexual fantasies in exchange for drugs. Like a spider weaving a web to trap an unwitting fly, Pete enjoys playing games of intrigue in which his fantasies are played out. His greatest fear is the fear of being exposed. It would appear that he seeks to capitalize on other people's vulnerability before they can spot any weakness in him. Whether in prison or on the streets, Pete masturbates a dozen or more times a day to elaborate fantasies of control and degradation. Armed with the highly fatalistic belief that people do not change and the highly malevolent belief that all women are "whores," Pete maintains that he would be willing to risk lethal injection for the opportunity to have a sex slave who would submit to his every demand.

Given the destructive, self-indulgent, and frightening nature of Pete's thoughts and actions, it is easy to see why some people might consider him

mad (“crazy”), bad (“evil”), or worse. Some psychologists would label Pete a psychopath, antisocial personality, or **career criminal**. The purpose of this book is to illustrate how viewing Pete as evil, crazy, or psychopathic impedes our ability to understand him, hinders our ability to effectively intervene with him, and in the long run makes it that much more difficult for him to change. To use such terms to describe Pete or any other offender is to discount the possibility of learning something new about or from him. The words we use, rather than being a simple matter of semantics, reflect our thinking and our thinking influences our behavior. Words like *evil*, *crazy*, and *psychopath* may preemptively reflect the belief that we already know what the problem is and how it should be handled (i.e., incarceration, lethal injection, medication) rather than our willingness to thoroughly investigate the problem, form a complete understanding of it, and find a lasting solution to it.

This book adopts the premise that instead of assigning labels to offenders and conceptualizing them as qualitatively distinct from others, there is a spectrum of criminal behavior and a range of factors that potentially influence the path an offender takes with respect to this spectrum. Rather than focusing on the individual high-rate offender as an accepted category, this book traces the dimensions along which all offenders are arrayed and offers insight into how and why these high-rate offenders assume the highest positions on these dimensions. Likewise, developmental and transitional models, which emphasize age- and state-graded trajectories while contributing valuable information to the study of crime, are no more comprehensive an explanation of crime than the dispositional models that focus on high-rate offenders. The tension between these two models, one of which views high-rate offenders as a distinct category of offender and the other of which views criminals as falling into one or more developmental trajectories, has created a schism in theoretical criminology and clinical forensic psychology. It is the position of this book that integrating the career criminal (high-risk offender) and **criminal career** (age- and state-graded trajectories) paradigms into a single model, referred to here as the **criminal lifestyle** (integrated series of thoughts and actions conducive to habitual criminal behavior), holds promise of mending the career criminal–criminal career schism.

Crime

Lay and scientific explanations of crime can be insightful, intriguing, and—on occasion—misleading. It is imperative, then, that we review some of the more popular lay and scientific theories of crime.

Lay Explanations of Crime

Crime as Evil

Evil is a religio-moral concept that has worked its way into many people's everyday vocabularies. When somebody says or does something with which we do not agree, we conclude that he or she is wrong. When somebody says or does something with which we vehemently disagree, we may punctuate our displeasure by labeling the person evil. **Lay explanations of crime** are commonly held beliefs about the causes of crime, which while popular, have not been subjected to rigorous scientific investigation. The notion of pure or inherent evil, for instance, not only lacks a clear scientific foundation but conflicts with much of what we know about offenders. Rarely do the perpetrators of evil acts view their behavior as unjustified or gratuitous. More often, the perpetrators of evil acts view their actions as justified and reasonable (Baumeister, 1997). The students who served as guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) viewed the rules laid out by Dr. Zimbardo as reasonable and necessary for the orderly running of their mock jail. By the same token, the students who simulated the role of prisoners in this experiment probably viewed their animosity toward the rules and their captors as justified. When conflict erupted during the experiment, each party attributed the conflict to the other side and considered its own actions a reasonable response to the unreasonable demands or insubordination of its evil opponent. As long as these attitudes persisted, there was little hope for reconciliation, and as long as we subscribe to the view that crime reflects pure or inherent evil, we will continue to fall short in our efforts to understand, predict, and control crime. Pete's thoughts and actions could be construed as evil, but what benefit does this afford us in comprehending and changing his criminal behavior?

Crime as Crazy

Whereas evil is a religio-moral construct, labeling someone crazy because we don't understand his or her thoughts and actions derives from **folk psychology**. Folk psychology, also known as commonsense psychology, is the study of how we try to predict and understand other people's behavior by cognitively interpreting their behavior and forming attributions or causal inferences for their actions (Heider, 1958). People are often quite adept at predicting other people's behavior and ascribing various mental states to them (Stich & Nichols, 2003). Whether this attributional process is driven by people's knowledge of the inner workings of the human mind (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997) or is a form of mental simulation that requires little

information on the thinking patterns of others (Gordon, 1986), it can have a profound effect on how people interpret each other's actions. An aspect of attribution that is particularly relevant to the current discussion is people's interpretation of beliefs to which they do not prescribe or cannot relate. These beliefs, sometimes referred to as discrepant beliefs, are the meanings we attach to beliefs that are different from our own. Stich and Nichols (2003) asserted that discrepant belief attribution systems display inaccuracies that reflect a lack of information about certain important aspects of the topic at hand. Attributions of crazy are an example of how we interpret discrepant beliefs.

Some people might classify Pete as crazy because it is difficult for them as outside observers to understand and relate to his actions. The senseless violence in which he has engaged over the course of his life is something we just cannot fathom because it is so alien to our experience. Most people would not think about robbing a bank or plying someone with drugs in order to exploit them sexually, let alone do these things. Just the thought of these actions is enough to make most people cringe. By classifying Pete's behavior as crazy and unexplainable, however, we ultimately shut down important avenues of understanding and potential routes of change. We must understand Pete and how early learning experiences contributed to the formation of his criminal lifestyle before we can understand his behavior. Sexual enticements from his aunt and mother coupled with physical bullying from his uncles resulted in the formation of a worldview based on malevolence and helplessness. To gain control over a malevolent environment, he identified with his aggressors and decided it was better to hurt and control others than wait around for them to hurt and control him. He consequently took a proactive approach to the psychological and physical dangers he perceived in his childhood environment.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Pete is a victim of his early experiences and therefore not responsible for the "evil" and "crazy" things he does. To understand Pete is to put ourselves in a position to help him do something about his self- and other-destructive behavior and prevent other young children from following in his footsteps. Appreciating the early childhood roots of some of Pete's actions and the role his identification with a criminal lifestyle currently plays in the self- and other-destructive path his life has taken does not absolve him of responsibility for these actions. At every point along the path that leads to a criminal lifestyle, Pete made choices, and it is these choices that led him to where he is today. Early environment has an effect on our behavior but it is our interpretation of past and current events that has the greatest impact on our current conduct. Behaviorists have traditionally held that a person is a product of his or her

environment. I would modify this statement to say that each of us is the product of our experience (which includes both the environment and our perception of it) as well as various genetic predispositions.

Scientific Explanations of Crime

Crime as a Career

It is easy to see why some social scientists believe crime conforms to a career when we consider the fact that a small fraction of the offender population commits the majority of offenses recorded in any particular jurisdiction. DeLisi (2005) estimated that 10% of the criminal population is responsible for over 50% of all crime and between 60% and 100% of all rapes, murders, and kidnappings. In their classic study on delinquency in a cohort of Philadelphia-born male youth, Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972) determined that 6% of their sample accounted for 52% of the delinquent adjudications compiled by the cohort. Using a later born cohort of males and females, also from Philadelphia, Tracy, Wolfgang, and Figlio (1990) ascertained that 7% of the sample accounted for 61% of the delinquencies, 60% of the murders, 75% of the rapes, and 73% of the robberies committed by the cohort. This relationship has been replicated in studies conducted in California (Chaiken & Chaiken, 1982); Racine, Wisconsin (Shannon, 1982); Denver, Colorado; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, New York (Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 1995), as well as in England (Farrington & West, 1993), Denmark (Kryvsgaard, 2003), Sweden (Stattin & Magnusson, 1991), and New Zealand (Fergusson, Horwood, & Nagin, 2000).

The notion of a career criminal is popular in certain quarters of the scientific community and constitutes one of the leading **scientific explanations of crime** espoused by psychologists and criminal justice experts. There are several problems with this conceptualization, however. First, the notion of a career criminal presumes the existence of a qualitatively distinct category of offender. Taxometric research clearly indicates that, contrary to the career criminal paradigm, psychopathy, antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), criminal lifestyle, and other crime-related constructs are quantitatively ordered along a continuum rather than qualitatively organized into distinct categories of behavior. A second limitation of the career criminal paradigm is that it has given rise to a number of negative criminal justice outcomes and policies, from prison overcrowding to California's "three strike" law. The unstated and sometimes stated assumption of the career criminal paradigm is that high-rate offenders do not change and the best way to manage their