

## A Mixed Method Exploration of Psychosocial Attribution of Criminal Behavior Among Prisoners

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### ABSTRACT

The rise in global crime rates requires proper research into a situational aspect of why an individual ends up committing the crime. Previous studies have suggested that the psychosocial variable has occupied a pivotal role in criminal behavior literature. Yet, no previous study has examined it in the context of developing country Nepal. The purpose of the study was to examine psychosocial and other potential factors of criminal behavior in a sample of 30 prisoners from Jagannath Deval Prison, Sundhara. The semi-structured interview questionnaire aimed to collect self-reported attribution for committing the crime. The Levenson Psychopathy Self-report Scale (Levenson et al., 1995) was used to assess the psychopathy variable. The analysis revealed that one-third of the respondents obtained higher than the cut-off score in Levenson Psychopathic Checklist. Several psychosocial factors, such as social injustice, negative childhood experiences, defense against strain, immaturity, etc., were attributed as prime reasons for conviction.

**Keywords:** *Psychopathy, criminal behavior, psychology and crime, psychosocial factors, Crime in developing country.*

**C**rime is a behavior that goes against state laws, is socially harmful, and violates values protected by the government (Marchuk, 2014). Criminal behaviors include indulging in acts prohibited by law such as destruction of public property and theft or not performing behaviors expected by law. In the present context, a criminal act is a worldwide phenomenon.

Governments throughout the globe put serious efforts to control crime and maintain peace and harmony. However, crime reports have not decreased in a significant term. Despite the decrease in homicide (Brookman, 2010) and attempted murder (Walker et al., 2009 as cited in Brookman, 2010) in some parts of the world, crimes such as rape in various countries including, Sweden (Roden, 2018), Ireland (Burke, 2018), India (Bandyopadhyay, 2018), and Nepal has been rising (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). There has also been an increase in the cases of kidnapping, abduction (Crimes in India, 2018), fraud, theft (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016), drug-related crime (Malby, 2010), cybercrime, and corruption. In many

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countries, including England (Tarvis, 2018), India (Crimes in India, 2018), and Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016) there has been an increase in the overall reported crimes. Criminal behaviors have several roots, and various theories and empirical researches explored different causes of criminal behavior. Classical strain theory, general strain theory, and social learning theory are important theories, and empirical studies have highlighted the role of genes, peer pressure, childhood abuse, maltreatment, and psychopathic traits in criminal behaviors.

Classical strain theory (Merton, 1938 as cited in Pals, 2015) asserts that various forms of deviance, including crime, might result from the strain caused by an inability to achieve a culturally determined goal for monetary success. Crime occurs when unlawful acts such as theft, drug dealing, and prostitution are used to achieve monetary success (Jang and Agnew, 2015). General strain theory, proposed by Agnew in 1992, holds that crime may occur not only due to the inability to achieve monetary success but also due to strains such as negative treatment by others and loss of valued possessions or family member, and an inability to reach the desired goal (Paternoster and Mazorelle, 1994). The Social Learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura in 1977, emphasizes the role of people's association with others committing the crime. Social learning theory embodies fundamental premises that include differential reinforcement, imitation, and differential association (Akers and Sellers, 2004). John Bowlby's attachment theory linked deviant acts to disruptive attachment with the primary caretaker (Bolen, 2014). A disruptive attachment can lead to cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for an infant. The long term consequence of maternal deprivation is affectionless psychopathy.

Some empirical researches highlight the role of heredity (Widom, 1989) in criminal behavior, while others emphasize psychosocial factors (Esiri, 2016). Even though studies conducted on families of convicted criminals have suggested a role of genetic factors in certain criminal behavior (Widom, 1989), the correlation between genetic characteristics and criminal behavior is still a matter of debate (Wilson, 2011). Some studies have highlighted the link between brain lesions and injury (Darby, Horn, Cushman, and Fox, 2018; Lane, St. Pierre, Lauterbach, and Koliatsos, 2017) to criminal behavior.

Many psychological factors are also important in the origin and maintenance of criminal behavior. Peer pressure is one important determinant of adolescent's substance abuse, violence, and other criminal activities (Esiri, 2016). Affiliation with deviant peers is significantly associated with violent crime, property crime, alcohol abuse, cannabis abuse, and nicotine dependence (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell & Horwood, 2002). Similarly, child sexual abuse and maltreatment is significantly associated with antisocial behavior, substance abuse (Bergen, Martin, Richardson, Allison & Roeger, 2004), and adult crime. Abusive and neglecting childhood is associated with a higher crime rate in adulthood (Widom, 1989). Moreover, early relational trauma contributes to the onset of violent offending behavior and is linked with higher psychopathic traits (Craparo, Schimmenti & Caretti, 2013).

Psychopaths constitute approximately one percent of the global population, but they represent 25% of prisoners in the United States and four percent of corporate CEOs (Ronson, 2011). Psychopathy is a robust predictor of criminal behavior and recidivism (Dhingra and Buduszek, 2013). Anderson and Keihl (2014) reported that people with psychopathy traits do have reduced activity in brain regions associated with emotional information, thus disrupting the cognitive process involved in socialization. Combined together, individual factors like aggressiveness, impulsiveness, psychopathy; family factors

such as parental divorce or low socio-economic background of the family, peer-related factors like antisocial association, and environmental factors such as high crime neighborhood are found to be important correlates of criminal behavior (Farrington, 2004 as cited in Elonheimo et al., 2009).

Even though biological and psychosocial factors can contribute equally to criminal behaviors, exploration of psychosocial factors has a two-fold advantage. First, it is more practical to explore psychosocial than biological factors in a limited resource setting like Nepal. Second, it is easier to intervene in psychosocial factors in the context of Low and Middle Income Country (LMIC) like Nepal. Such intervention can be helpful in the prevention of crime and recidivism. Thus, we explored psychosocial factors among convicted people in the selected prison of Nepal.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Methodological approach***

The study employed a simultaneous mixed method design. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected during a single phase of data collection, to investigate different facets of crime causation. Qualitative data was used to gain insight into the life experiences of prisoners and to assess the attributing factors for criminal behavior. The psychopathy scale was used to obtain quantitative information to aid in further exploration of the causative factor for the crime.

### ***Participants and Procedure***

The study was designed to assess the psychosocial factors of criminal behavior from the perspective of convicted people. Thirty prisoners of Jagannath Deval Prison were recruited as study participants (25 male and 5 female). These participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling. The respondents were convicted for five different reasons; intentional homicide (n=13), theft (n=5), fraud (n=5), rape (n=4) and dacoit (n=3). The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 65 years. A number code was assigned to each participant. After receiving ethical approval from the Central Department of Psychology, Tribhuvan University, we obtained ethical approval from Prison Management Division and prison authorities. We obtained informed consent from the participants after providing them detailed information regarding the research objectives and rights of the participants.. Semi-structured interview face to face interview was conducted by the first author and the questionnaire on psychopathy. Meanwhile, some of the participants helped us recruit other participants.

### ***Materials***

Demographic information sheet, the semi-structured interview schedule developed by authors and Levenson's Self-report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) was used to collect data. The first part of the data collection sheet included demographic information and the semi-structured interview schedule. Demographic information included information about age, gender, marital status, and income (before conviction) of respondents. A semi-structured interview schedule covered information about the attribution for conviction.

The second part included Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale. It is a test designed to assess psychopathy. The items are rated on a four-point scale (1=disagree strongly to 4=agree strongly), with seven reversed scored items designed to control various response style or test-taking set. Depending on the score obtained, respondents can be divided into

three groups; psychopathic, mixed, and non-psychopathic. The internal consistency of the tool ranged from 0.63 to 0.85 (Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999), and it exhibits good construct and convergent validity.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative information was coded and analyzed in Microsoft excel. Only frequency was calculated. The interpretative Phenomenological analysis approach was used to gain insight into the prime reason respondents attributed for committing the crime. Data were organized in a tabulated form so that it was easy to pick out overlapping concepts and themes. The overall structure of the analysis was provided by relating the identified themes into 'clusters' or concepts. In the final stage, the researcher developed a master list of themes which identified the main features and concerns by the participants. A list of themes was stated with evidence quotations from the interview which best captured the essence of the person's thoughts and their emotions about the experience of the phenomenon being explored.

## **RESULTS**

### *Psychopathy an insight into experiences of psychopathic offenders*

**Table 1 Psychopathy among the respondents**

S.no	Non-psychopathic	Psychopathic	Mixed group
8		10	12

The result showed that nearly one-third of the respondent (n=10) scored higher than cutoff in Levenson's Psychopathy Scale. Further, these respondents were involved in varied criminal offenses including homicide (n=4), theft (n=3), fraud (n=1), rape (n=1), and robbery (n=1). Half of the respondents were arrested multiple times for crimes such as theft, robbery with maximum times of arrest ranging up to three times. More than half of the respondents (n=6) belonging to this group verbalized a sense of lack of regret, as they believed they were imprisoned with false allegations. They mentioned themselves to be a victim in those cases. The cases who were arrested multiple times were denying the allegations placed on them. Two respondents of psychopathic criteria (p17 & p28) expressed a history of parental deprivation. Three respondents (n=3) were having a history of substance abuse (especially marijuana, codeine & alcohol) in their past.

### **Themes that emerged as the reasons for conviction**

Respondents attributed diverse reasons for their conviction. Apart from false allegations, lack of self-control and immaturity, defense against strain, mediation of peer influence, downfall in occupation, social injustice, and negative childhood experiences were major factors respondents attributed for their conviction.

**Table 2 Attribution of reason for a crime**

Reasons for crime	N
Lack of self-control	9
Revenge	8
Peer pressure	7
Economic instability	3
Injustice	22
Negative childhood experiences	3

**Theme 1: Lack of self-control and immaturity**

Almost one-third of the respondent (n=9) attributed a lack of self-control to their offense. For these respondents, a lack of control over aggression was the main reason behind the conviction. They also expressed immaturity as a contributor to their conviction. They stated that imprisonment had most importantly taught them the value of time. One of the respondents reported, "It happened when I was young, but now I have learned a lot. It has been 8 years in jail. I have learned how important time is." [p7] The remaining respondents, however, reported good self-control during the incident.

**Theme 2: Revenge seeking**

Eight of the respondents attributed the motive of revenge taking as a factor for their conviction. Especially the young adult groups were highly involved in seeking revenge in response to some physical or emotional insults done to them. Two respondents were arrested in the same case of homicide because of revenge-seeking behavior. One participant reported "I had a happy married life. I had a group of friends, and we were returning home. Suddenly a gang of boys attacked us. I along with my friends were injured and had to stay in hospitals for a few days. After one and a half months, we thought to take revenge. We had our gang and this incident happened." [p7] Respondents not only took revenge for the physical insult but also for the insult or betrayal by intimate ones. Especially, men were actively involved in seeking revenge against the treachery of their spouse.

**Theme 3: Mediated by peer influence**

One-fourth of the respondent (n=7) expressed that friends were somewhere responsible for the crime they committed. In six homicides and one theft case, friends had a major influence on the crime they committed. These respondents expressed that they did it for the sake of their friendship, or they did it because of peer pressure. For example, one participant reported, "I was emotionally blackmailed by a friend of mine. I thought his problem to be my problem and this incident happened. He was my friend in my army barrack. His wife had an extramarital affair. So, we planned together to finish her." [p6] Two respondents reported that they were connected with gangs involved in illegal activities like the supply of armed guns during a period of political instability in the country and thus convicted after the end of political instability.

**Theme 4: The downfall in occupation**

Three out of five respondents arrested for fraud cases expressed that they were working in a highly prestigious financial cooperative, consultancies, or business firms and were earning a lucrative amount. The reason they attributed for conviction was the downfall of their business due to political instability in-country or internal scams in the organisation. For instance, one of the respondents verbalized, "There was a huge cooperative craze in 2055 B.S. (approximately 1999 A.D.) I invested in my sister's cooperative firm against my wife's will. After I left, there was an internal scam in the organization. As a result, our investors were unable to get their money back. That is why five innocent people, including me, got arrested."

**Theme 5: Social Injustice and Discrimination**

The respondents who were arrested more than once expressed that the way society treated them after they returned from prison pushed them towards crime. The majority of respondents subjectively confirmed that they were victims of social injustice (n=22). Few of the Respondents (n= 4) were concerned with the way the society will perceive them once they are released. For instance, one participant verbalized, "at first I got arrested for theft

when I was 14 years old. I used to work in a restaurant. I had my sister's wedding and thus asked my owner for some money to attend the ceremony. He did not give me, and I stole some money. I got imprisoned for two years.

I think that was an injustice. Community people treated me unfairly when I returned after conviction, and this pushed me toward crime. Then, I got arrested for a robbery case and after that for homicide. Even though I was involved in the robbery, I was trapped in case of homicide."<sup>[p14]</sup> Some participants opined that harsh punishment from society at an early age also aided their criminal involvement. One respondent convicted for rape considers the allegation as false one framed by coworkers in the organization. He said, "I was framed and convicted. I will fight for justice until my last breath." [p 25]

### **Theme 6: Negative childhood experiences**

Some respondents (n=3) described having a history of child abuse. Two of the respondents who committed homicide expressed the history of verbal abuse in his childhood by neighbors due to their low socioeconomic conditions. Some participants had witnessed domestic violence at home. One respondent said, "I still remember the abuse my mother and I experienced during my childhood, from my father. I can still feel the pain, insult, and tears my mother had. I still remember my neighbors calling me a "*Bhatuwa*" (a term used to harass people with low economic status) and scolding me for playing with their children. It was a curse to be born as a poor person. When I think about it, I feel pained." [p11]

Other respondents who committed theft (chori), rape (Jabarjastikarani), and homicide (Kartavya Jyan) complained about a lack of love and affection due to parental death or maternal separation in their early childhood. Three respondents had a history of parental death during early childhood, and two respondents had parental death during their adolescence. Participant number 25, who was arrested with rape allegations, reported deprivation of parental love and affection during childhood. His father died when he was a toddler, and his mother dropped him at an orphanage to get remarried. Now he is convicted for the rape of one worker in the same orphanage, where he lived for years and graduated. Highlighting the deprivation of love during childhood, he stated, "There was a time I used to cry for my mother's love. I had waited so long to be with my family. I got reunited with her after an era and had got married recently. But because of my imprisonment, I feel like I lost the family." [p 25]

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Around half of the respondents who met psychopathic criteria reported a lack of remorse for the crime they committed. Almost half of the respondents of the psychopathic criteria were arrested multiple times for committing crimes such as theft and robbery. Also, the majority of the respondents of the psychopathic criteria were arrested for committing serious crimes such as homicide. The findings supported the results by Hakkanen-Nyholm, and Hare (2009) that offenders with high psychopathy scores are more likely to deny the charges, can manipulate the criminal justice system, and not embarrassed by being caught in a lie. Results also support the conclusion of Dhingra and Boduszek (2013) that psychopathy is a strong predictor of criminal behavior and recidivism.

The respondent attributed the inability to control anger and immaturity as a factor in their conviction. Immaturity of any type is an obvious factor in antisocial acts including, delinquency (Steinberg and Scott, 2003) and criminal behavior. Prior et al. (2011) found that offenders, than non-offenders, have less maturity in moral reasoning. Also, anger

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management programs are effective in reducing hostile aggression and reactive criminal thinking (Walters, 2008), suggest that inability to control anger can be a factor in criminal behavior. Present findings support the notion of self-control theory that a lack of self-control is a major factor in criminal behavior (Gottfredson&Hirschi, 1990). A strong deficit in emotional intelligence reported among the criminal population (Megreya, 2014) might also have contributed to the low self-control and criminal behaviors of our respondents.

The result of the present study showed that revenge-seeking was one important motive for criminal behaviors. Few things can catch attention like revenge (Jackson, Choi, and Gelfand, 2019), and “Revenge is a well-recognized motive for crime and violence” (Kivivuori, Savolainen, &Aaltonen, 2015, p. 69). Kivivuori, Savolainen, &Aaltonen (2015) found that revenge was a factor in approximately fifty percent of the interpersonal assaults and ten to twenty percent of runaway and vandalism. Revenge is also one of the motives reported in firesetting crimes (Barnoux and Gannon, 2014).

Peer influence and gang membership reported in this study have been important contributors to criminal behavior. Peer pressure is one of the factors influencing juvenile delinquency and criminal behavior (Esiri, 2016; Haynie& Osgood, 2005; Kivivuori, Savolainen, &Aaltonen, 2015), and so is the gang membership (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano & Hawkins, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte& Chard-Wiesrchem, 1993). Peers can have either a passive or active influence on offending decision making (Hoeben and Thomas, 2019).

The attribution of downfall in cooperative business as a source of criminal behavior is consistent in the Nepalese context. In Nepal, cooperatives have a dark reputation and have endangered the saving of thousands of depositors (Dixit, 2017). Many scams have been published here and there in cooperatives, and lack of strict regulatory mechanisms is one important reason for this (Maharjan, 2020). A downfall in the economy is one of the important factors contributing to crime. Unemployment, income inequality, and poverty increase the chances of criminal behaviors (Mittal, Goyal, Sethi, and Hemanth, 2019; Pare and Felson, 2019).

Majority of the respondents expressed that they were a victim of injustice and discrimination, and this contributed to their offense. A sense of social injustice and discrimination can bring rebellion tendencies, which might contribute to criminal behavior even though the relationship between injustice and crime is complex (Scheuerman, 2013). Burt, Simons, and Gibbons (2012) found racial discrimination as positively associated with increased crime. The general strain theory of crime also advocates injustice as one of the roots of crime. This theory holds that crime is more likely to occur if the strain is perceived as injustice. Messner (1989) noted that economic discrimination is significantly related to the homicide.

Among some respondents, childhood abuse and witnessing of domestic violence were accompanied by death or separation of parents. Childhood maltreatment can contribute to crime and violence because children imitate other's behavior. Also, a lack of attachment and emotional care is proposed as one factor in deviance and crime. Previous studies also outlined the link of various forms of maltreatment in crime and delinquency (Widom, 2000; Rebellon& Gundy, 2005). Negative social label is there for children of alcoholic parents or the children belonging to the low socioeconomic family in many communities in Nepal.

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Explaining criminal behavior thus seems very complex as many factors contribute to it at the same time. Thus, every state should invest much to fight against poverty, inequality, unemployment, and to provide justice, rather than increasing police and punishment (Syed and Ahmed, 2013).

This study has some limitations. This study was conducted in a small sample, and self-report was the primary source of qualitative information. Even though subjective narratives provide insight, they are obstacles in the generalizability of findings. Also, we were unable to identify any specific connections between psychopathic behavior and the seriousness of the crime. We can assume that confidentiality and anonymity clause would have reduced a social desirability bias. We couldn't assess whether this bias influenced the result of self-reports. Finally, we did not explore gender differences in the attribution of conviction. Further researchers can thus focus on a larger sample. Also, researchers can explore gender differences in the attribution of conviction.

Despite this limitation, this is the first psychological research aimed at exploring the attribution of crime among prisoners in Nepal. This provides some broader insight into our understanding of causative factors leading to criminal behavior.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results showed that one-third of the respondents were psychopathic. Almost one-third of the respondent reported a lack of self-control as a correlate for their criminal behavior. Further, immaturity, defense against strain, peer influence, downfall in occupation, social injustice, and negative childhood experiences were major factors respondents attributed to their conviction.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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