

# Criminal thinking, moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing in prisoners

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Crime is the worldwide problem due to its increasing rate and diverse effects on the whole society.<sup>1</sup> The current study sought to understand criminal behavior in Pakistani culture by exploring the relationship between criminal thinking, moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing in prisoners by taking psychological wellbeing as dependent variable.

**Subjects and methods:** Correlational research design was used and the sample of adult prisoners was selected from District Jail Lahore by using purposive sampling technique. For assessment purpose demographic sheet, Criminal Thinking Scale, Moral Disengagement Scale, and Mental Health Continuum-Short Form were used. The data was stored and analyzed in SPSS version 20.

**Results:** The results showed significant positive relationship between criminal thinking and moral disengagement whereas, significant negative correlation was found between criminal thinking and psychological wellbeing. Similarly moral disengagement was found to be negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing in prisoners. Regression analysis revealed that criminal thinking negatively predicts the psychological wellbeing. Moreover significant group differences on psychological wellbeing were found between convicted and under trial prisoners.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that criminal thinking, moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing are significantly correlated in crime context; therefore, various interventions for prediction of criminal attitude in various populations should be made by involving jail administration and the relevant policy makers.

## Keywords:

Criminal thinking, moral disengagement, psychological wellbeing, prisoners

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of crime is the major concern for the whole population and is often investigated in psychological perspective because crime is found to be associated with psychological issues.<sup>1</sup> In the current era, psychologists and psychiatrists are paying particular attention to psychological wellbeing of prisoners, because prisoners are more susceptible for poor psychological wellbeing due to involvement in criminal activities and the effects of incarceration on the wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

At least 405,895 crime cases were reported by Punjab Police in 2017.<sup>3</sup> These are threatening statistics for the whole society thus, there is need to understand criminal behavior. One major factor in exploring criminal behavior is determined by measuring criminal thinking.<sup>4</sup> Criminal thinking is the thought content and process conducive to the initiation and maintenance of habitual law breaking behavior.<sup>5</sup> Criminals have a

variety of non-criminal and criminal backgrounds, studies have established that individuals from such environment which promote antisocial behavior, are expected to incorporate criminal thinking into their cognitions and subsequently, are more likely to commit crime.<sup>4</sup> However moral disengagement is also considered crucial factor in the description of criminal behavior.<sup>6</sup> Moral disengagement involves a process of cognitive re-framing or re-construing of criminal behavior as being morally acceptable without changing the actual behavior or the moral values.<sup>7</sup> Morally disengaged cognitions are not only related to aggression, but that these cognitions are highly associated with antisocial and criminal behaviors<sup>8</sup> as well as hostile rumination and violence.<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan has a shortage of forensic literature in this regard, but international literature gives us evidence that moral disengagement operates by morally justifying destructive behavior with an impact of criminal thinking<sup>8,10</sup> and these criminal activities have negative outcomes on psychological wellbeing.<sup>11,12</sup> Thus the current study aims to understand criminal behavior in

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local cultural context, by exploring the relationship between criminal thinking, moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing in prisoners by taking psychological wellbeing as dependent variable.

### SUBJECTS AND METHODS

This correlational study conducted at District Jail Lahore after approval of Ethical Review Committee. The study duration was March – August 2018. Total 60 male prisoners (both convicted and under trial) who have been in jail for at least 6 months, with the age range of 20 to 40 years (young adults) were included through purposive sampling technique. The participants were interviewed by the researcher. A written informed consent was taken from the participants. Criminal thinking was measured by Criminal Thinking Scale (CTS)<sup>13</sup> and moral disengagement was assessed on Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS).<sup>14</sup> For measuring psychological wellbeing, Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF)<sup>15</sup> was used which comprised of three sub scales; emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing and psychological wellbeing. All the scales are validated for Pakistani population before conducting this study. The results and demographic details were retrieved using SPSS version 20.

### RESULTS

The qualitative characteristics of prisoners such as criminal status and occupation were presented as frequencies and percentages (Table 1). While quantitative characteristics of prisoners such as age and monthly family income were presented as mean and standard deviations (Table 2). In this study, total 60 prisoners were enrolled. By applying Pearson Product Moment Correlation, positive strong correlation between criminal thinking and moral disengagement ( $p$ -value<0.01), negative weak relationship between moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing ( $p$ -value<0.05), as well a negative medium association between criminal thinking and psychological wellbeing ( $p$ -value<0.01) was found in prisoners. The present study was focused on psychological wellbeing of prisoners; but in addition social wellbeing and emotional wellbeing were also taken into count, and results showed that emotional wellbeing had negative, weak correlation with criminal thinking ( $p$ -value<0.05) however emotional, social and psychological wellbeing were highly, positively correlated with each another ( $p$ -value<0.01).

On using Hierarchical Regression, criminal thinking influenced significantly ( $p$ -value<0.05), negatively predicted psychological wellbeing in prisoners. However moral disengagement did not predict psychological wellbeing in prisoners. When Independent sample t-test was applied, results showed that there was significant differences on psychological wellbeing ( $p$ -value<0.001) and social wellbeing ( $p$ -value<0.05) of convicted and under trial prisoners. Convicted prisoners were higher in psychological and social wellbeing than under trial prisoners. All the collected information was stored and analyzed in SPSS 20.

**Table 1. Qualitative characteristics of prisoners**

Characteristics	Frequency (%)
<i>Criminal status</i>	
Convicted	17 (28.3)
Under trial	43 (71.7)
<i>Crime committed</i>	
Murder	35 (58.3)
Rape	11 (18.3)
Drugs smuggling	4 (6.7)
Fight/dispute	3 (05)
Corruption	2 (3.3)
Kidnapping	1 (1.7)
Cheating/Forgery/Fraud	1 (1.7)
Attempt to murder	1 (1.7)
Cyber crime	1 (1.7)
Kidney smuggling	1 (1.7)
<i>Area of crime</i>	
Village	14 (23.3)
City	46 (76.7)
<i>History of imprisonment</i>	
1 <sup>st</sup> time in jail	57 (95)
2 <sup>nd</sup> time in jail	1 (1.7)
3 <sup>rd</sup> time in jail	2 (3.3)
<i>Ashamed of crime</i>	
Yes	50 (83.3)
No	10 (16.7)
<i>Father's occupation</i>	
Unemployed	2 (3.3)
Self employed	49 (81.7)
Private job	5 (8.3)
Government job	2 (3.3)
Professional	2 (3.3)
<i>Mother's occupation</i>	
House wife	58 (96.7)
Working	2 (3.3)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	38 (63.3)
Unmarried	20 (33.3)
Divorced/ Widower	2 (3.4)
<i>Family system</i>	
Joint	39 (65)
Nuclear	21 (35)
<i>Occupation before coming to jail</i>	
Unemployed	7 (11.7)
Self employed	41 (68.3)
Private job	8 (13.3)
Government job	3 (05)
Professional	1 (1.7)

Table 2. Quantitative characteristics of prisoners

Characteristics	Mean
Age (years + SD)	29.37±6.4
Education (years)	7.03
Father's education (years)	3.6
Mother's education (years)	2.4
Family monthly income (PKR)	25083.3
Total duration of imprisonment (months)	14.5±9.9

## DISCUSSION

The present study was carried out at District Jail Lahore, findings revealed that criminal thinking and moral disengagement positively correlated in prisoners. Previous studies like Walters<sup>16</sup> described proactive criminal thinking as moral disengagement and found that proactive (moral disengagement) criminal thinking mediated the agreeableness offending relationship. Similarly Bandura and colleagues<sup>14</sup> determined the role of moral disengagement in deviant behavior in common and violence and delinquency in particular. Moral disengagement negatively related to tolerance toward aggression, punishment fear, and irritability.<sup>17</sup> Researches on criminal thinking and moral disengagement provide us the evidence of their relationship, as both are associated with criminal behavior, thus it confirms the findings of current research.

The study found negative relationship of criminal thinking and moral disengagement with psychological wellbeing in prisoners. Morgan and colleagues<sup>18</sup> also proposed in their research on mentally disordered offenders, that criminal thinking is associated to mental illness and lack of criminal thinking ensures wellbeing in offenders. In a large group of prisoners, Walters<sup>16</sup> determined the role of criminal thinking in past and future crime relationship, and weak self-efficacy to avoid future legal trouble. Criminal thinking mediated the juvenile delinquency and adult criminality relationship.<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon was also found in another study in which self-indulgent and moral disengagement were found to mediate crime continuity, thus criminal thinking and moral disengagement not only negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing which leads to antisocial behavior, but also mediated the past crime and future crime connection.<sup>16</sup>

According to this study criminal thinking was negatively predicting psychological wellbeing in prisoners. The results can be associated with study of Morgan and associates<sup>18</sup> which explored that mentally disordered offenders produce criminal thinking. The research highlighted somewhat same factor that psychological wellbeing is highly affected by imprisonment.<sup>20</sup> Individuals develop such values,

attitudes and cognitions by interactions with a criminal group that encourage criminal thinking which further predicts negative mental health outcomes like antisocial behavior.<sup>21</sup>

Results indicated that moral disengagement was not a significant predictor of psychological wellbeing in our cultural context. It can be because of the defense mechanisms we use, as Bandura and group<sup>14</sup> described that morally disengaged persons use defense mechanisms, i.e. moral justification or diffusion of responsibility etc., this keeps them safe from anxiety, depression and feeling of guilt, thus the psychological wellbeing does not much affected. Moral disengagement is considered the propensity to **rationalize one's acts damaging the society** with the aim of self-esteem protection, minimizing the responsibility for the injury to the others.<sup>7</sup>

This study revealed that convicted prisoners were significantly high in psychological wellbeing, literature has also confirmed this that prisoners of under trial group were more impaired on wellbeing measure in **comparison to convicted criminal's group**.<sup>22</sup> Prisoners experience major psychological troubles at the start of the punishment, as the time passes, prisoners tend to create adaptation with the environment.<sup>11</sup>

The research focused on the psychological wellbeing of prisoners, and it is suggested that there is need of mental health professionals at Jail setups to treat co-occurring issues of mental illness and criminality by mental health treatment programs.

## CONCLUSION

Criminal thinking, moral disengagement and psychological wellbeing are significantly correlated in crime context; therefore, various interventions for prediction of criminal attitude in various populations should be made by involving jail administration and the relevant policy makers.

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