

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP IN TEENAGE CRIMINAL GROUPS. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The involvement of minors in criminal activity is, unfortunately, a common feature of modern society. Criminal activities tend to occur at increasingly younger ages and influence dramatically the lives of those involved.

This article aims to analyse the psychology of crime groups composed of teenagers of various ages and levels of experience in criminal activities, focusing on the leader of such groups. The approach is causal, explicative but also aiming to provide suggestions for controlling and reducing the incidence of such phenomena

Keywords: teenagers, crime, crime group, leader, personality disorder, social costs.

Introduction

Criminality during childhood and adolescence is an extremely delicate and controversial issue, which implies high social, psychological, emotional and financial costs. Juvenile delinquency / adolescent criminality are complex phenomena with significant social and cultural impact.

Although multi-disciplinary approaches constantly bring new information on these phenomena, there is still a margin of unpredictability with regard to the causality and mechanisms of their occurrence. The physiological, psychological, emotional and social characteristics of people of that age cause the above-mentioned phenomena to take atypical, explosive forms, with great destructive potential and social danger.

Criminal groups made up of young adult members are formed very easily and quickly and prove to be extremely effective in their antisocial activities. Moreover, paradoxically, if we take into account the emotional and social immaturity specific to such age, these groups act for long periods and are difficult to identify and prevent by law enforcement institutions.

The social structure of these groups consolidates quickly and the social-affective network develops virtually instantaneously. The phenomena associated with the leadership of these groups (organizing, planning, decision-making, control exercised in, and often outside, the criminal area), develop in parallel to the actual development of the group itself. Operational tasks are effectively assigned.

These are therefore the reasons why we decided to address the issue of teenage criminal groups leadership that is, to focus on their leader, in this article. We will accomplish this through a case study.

The criminal group: an overview

The acts which constitute the reason for the indictment: theft of private possessions (from several stores).

Group members: the analysed group is composed of 6 members, between 14 and 17 years of age, living in urban areas.

Members' experience in criminal activities varies from 8 months to 4 years. This experience has not necessarily been accumulated in this group.

The group's life (since the crime committed to arrest/annihilation) is of 32 months.

The criminal objective of the group is theft of merchandise from stores for the purpose of reselling it. The merchandise was electronic appliances, which are easy to resell.

There is no information available on the level of performance the group targeted. There are groups who intend to attain a certain level of crime, so that their whole activity oscillates around the targeted values. However, this is not the case of the group in question.

The frequency of crimes committed: the group does not have a periodicity of committing crimes, but seems to act occasionally, depending on the immediate needs of the members, but also of the opportunities.

The way they use the benefits of the committed crimes (i.e. the money obtained from the sale of stolen goods) is constant. With one exception (one of the members of the group supports his family with the money obtained from reselling the stolen goods), the money is used mainly for the acquisition and consumption of drugs and alcohol.

The educational level of the members: most of the members of the criminal group (5 out of 6, to be precise) attend school. The last had to take second examinations in several subjects and even to remain in the seventh form for an extra year.

Social environment and background are very diverse. Some of the members come from well-situated families, with social prestige within the community, others on the contrary, come from poor, even extremely poor, families.

The Group Structure

The sociometric technique also facilitates analysis of interpersonal relationships, the role of every member and the structure of the group. Taking into account the description available, we can identify *the basic structure* of the group, each member having *clearly* defined roles:

- The group leader: decides what exactly to steal and what stores to attack; decides how and when to act; establishes the details of the operation; waits in the car and informs the other members; distributes the money once the stolen objects have been sold.
- The lieutenant: makes decisions together with the leader, most of the times approving the latter's decisions; in addition, he takes active part in the actual stealing and reselling of the stolen goods.
- The group specialist: specialist in charge of the surveillance systems at the sites where the group is to operate and subsequently participates in the theft.
- The watcher: placed in strategic places, he makes sure that the group is not spotted and alerts the leader when possible risks appear.
- The other 2 members of the group participate actively in the operation.

Being a small group, communication is direct and easy. For ease of communication during the theft, the members of the group have 6 mobile phones.

Interpersonal relations appeared to be quite stable, the only debatable thing being identified after the analysis of the testimony of three members of the group, who admitted that they had committed several crimes. The question that arises is whether they confessed because they really wanted to do something good for their fellow members of the group, by reducing the expected penalty or they did it only for themselves (hoping that this could reduce their

punishment)? The testimony filed by those 3 members against the other could be signs of poor cohesion.

In terms of cohesion, this group was active for almost 3 years, time during which the members remained the same (only 2 members joined the group over time, the others have remained the same) and criminal activity did not change. This could indicate a high rate of cohesion. However, we have no information about the relationship of those six members outside of their illegal activities and nightclubbing.

The leader of the group is attached to other members. One of the members is part of this group just to earn money for his family. The sociometric technique clarifies the interpersonal relationships between the members of the group.

Unknown Information

Unfortunately, there are a few details we do not know, which could lead to a better understanding of this group, particularly of the role of the leader in the management of their criminal activity, such as:

- What was the frequency of their thefts?
- Was there a periodicity of their actions or were they just occasional?
- What is the amount of money obtained as a result of reselling the goods lifted from shops?
- How was each member of the group managing the stolen money?
- How did the police find out about the thefts?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

- O1. Psycho-behavioural profiling of the teenage leader of a criminal group.
- O2. Identifying social/interpersonal relations within the criminal group analysed from the perspective of the group leader.
- O3. Identifying ways of social and psychological recovery of the offending group members.

The method used is that of the case study.

The tools that we have used in order to achieve the objectives of the research are the following:

- Psychological tests;
- Sociometry;
- Anamnesis;
- Interview with various people (group members, police officers, lawyers, teachers, members of the families of those involved, etc.)
- Analysis of documents (depositions, testimonies etc.).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Subject's age: 16.

Sex: male.

Facts which constitute the subject matter of the indictment: theft.

Family and social environment

He lives with his parents and stepbrother, the latter being 14 years of age.

The family has a very good, even excellent, financial situation.

The mother remarried 3 years before. The reason for the divorce from her ex-husband was repeated physical violence.

The relationship with his mother is poor because he blames her for this divorce. He seems to have been very close to his natural father, although after the divorce the subject has not kept in touch with him.

The stepfather *has no time* for his education, because of his managing position at a local supermarket. The stepfather frequently reproaches him for his low performance at school and refuse to assume household responsibilities. He used his father's car, without his knowledge and without a driver's licence, being pulled over by the police. There is suspicion that he frequently uses one of the three cars owned by the family.

School and professional development

School performance is low and very low, which makes it hard for him to pass his subjects. His attendance is poor. His behaviour on school premises is aggressive, based on intimidation, as he has an athletic build, being stronger than most students of his age.

He has established mathematical skills he is not making use of. He manifests his obvious interest in mathematics and physics exclusively during classes, showing no intent to improve his skills.

Extracurricular activities and pursuits: martial arts and is interested in opening his own training facility. He does not display aggressive behaviour, but probably his height and build make it easy for him to quickly get what he wants.

Criminal Path

During his parents' divorce, he joined a neighbourhood criminal group for a short period, where he noticed the manner of easily obtaining various benefits (stolen goods and money). The same group provided him with the moral support he needed, strengthening his self-esteem (heavily damaged at that time). After a few months he left the group, constituting pretty soon his own criminal group, whose leader he has been since the very beginning. He is the one who makes the decisions within the group, while others seem to obey. In addition, he does not really operate with the group, only coordinates the theft, which confirms his leading position in the group.

He does not admit to having committed the crimes and is completely uncooperative during the progress of investigations. It is worth mentioning that he did not betray his fellows in the group, despite all the investigators' attempts.

He is currently undergoing a criminal trial.

Pathological and Psychiatric History

Psychiatric assessment has highlighted the fact that he does not suffer from any disorders likely to interfere with good judgment. He is perfectly healthy, without any medical history during childhood.

Psychological Evaluation

The subject is introvert (phlegmatic), manifesting an obvious and annoying attitude of superiority. His decision-making capacity is high; his decisions are quick and efficient in

relation to the goals. The tests indicate a slight concentration of attention deficit, in addition to a high level of perseverance and motivation. Self-esteem is low, which he manages to make up for with a strong tendency to dominate and manipulate those around him.

He is suspicious by nature, which is why he is the one who divides the money among his fellow members of the criminal group as their leader. According to the claims other members of the group, he appears to be fair in the distribution of benefits.

He does not feel comfortable when he is with groups other than the one he belongs to and whose leader he is. He has difficulties of adaptation and socialization, as well as low tolerance to frustration. He is also emotionally immature.

Physical aggression is mitigated through martial arts training. Moreover, he does not use physical aggression, only verbal aggression and his impressive stature to impose his will on the others.

Behaviour during the investigation: reluctant. He was passing remarks all the time, he was resisting investigation and worked with great difficulty. During testing has taken many breaks. The information provided was rudimentary and poor.

His motivation for choosing this kind of life: According to his statements, the motive for theft was the lack of money necessary for basic subsistence (food, clothing, etc.).

The real motivation of his acts: The subject, although he had a good financial situation, his was actually stealing in order to make money for drugs and various recreational activities. The need for power, his low self-esteem, and his inferiority complex led him to get involved in criminal activities.

At the same time, his criminal behaviour can be explained by the desire to demonstrate his independence from his father. Moreover, violent behaviour of his natural father against his mother, as well as his distant relationship with his stepfather might be the causes for which the minor has a tendency of domination. He is at the age of adolescence, when he is trying to demonstrate his superiority, especially before his stepfather who is always reproaching him. Through his tendency to dominate and be independent, the minor tries to compensate for his low self-esteem. When conducting an activity, he gains a sense of control.

The perception of the actual situation: He feels well with the group and wants to be their leader. He is devoid of any tendency of blaming himself, repeatedly stressing the responsibility of others for his situation and acts.

Discordant elements of the psycho-behavioural profile

Conscientiousness in the pursuit and achievement of goals is not supported by the ability to focus attention.

The distrust in others might have been caused by his previous relationship with his father and it explains why he prefers to take the lead. However, his distrust in others is in contradiction with the refusal to take part in the theft (the other members of the group actually operate), but may be caused by his low self-esteem and a hidden lack of trust in his own capabilities.

Moreover, distrust towards the others is contradicted by his entrusting the stolen goods to another member of the group, who was reselling them. At the same time, during the investigation, despite all the threats, he did not betray his fellows.

This behaviour toward the group betrays his need for affiliation, as well as a certain degree of socio-affective involvement in the relationship to the other members of the group.

Recommendations

1. Reintegration into the family: mother and father should be induced to communicate more with the minor, to pay more attention to him and his needs, as he is at an age when he needs moral support.
2. Because he has very good decision-making skills, it seems that he can actually be a leader. That is why we propose that he be integrated into the group of school mates and assigned responsibilities to the interests of the class, which will increase his self-confidence.
3. The emphasis should be on developing his mathematical skills by being assigned more problems and included in the mathematics club at school.
4. In order to keep any aggressive tendencies under control, it is useful that his coach explain to him that martial arts is a sport used for self-discipline and self-defence, not attack.
5. Although the minor was found not to be addicted to substances consumed, it is desirable that the possible sequels of drug use be taken into account. It is true that the frequency of drug use is not specified, but addiction can appear at any time. Therefore, the minor must understand the risks and avoid drugs in the future.

Conclusions

Following the analysis of the psychosocial behaviour of the adolescent criminal group leader, **several behavioural** predictions may be issued. Thus, in the absence of any control of the family and the school, it is very possible that this criminal behaviour may remit.

As regards the family, the lack of proper emotional, financial and educational support from its members, the low level of control exercised by the parents, the exaggerated freedom the subject enjoys can lead to further criminal activity.

Moreover, the involvement of the school being so poor, both in terms of curricular and extra-curricular activities, it could keep him on the verge of failure, namely failure of some of the subjects or the entire year.

By virtue of all these considerations, we infer that prompt intervention is required, involving psychological supportive counselling or even psychotherapy.

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