

Moral Judgment among Incarcerated Offenders from a Psychotherapeutic Background

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Abstract: *The present work is a preliminary attempt to examine whether the theory of information integration is applicable as a framework for the study of moral judgment by incarcerated offenders who underwent formal psychotherapy in prison (psychotherapeutic background). The hypothesis, derived from the theory, was that judgment would be based on more than a single source of information. This hypothesis was tested against an alternative, unidimensional prediction derived from the theory of object relations. Nineteen subjects, 14 of them hospitalized in the psychiatric ward of an Israeli prison, participated in a study based on a single subject experimental design, where every subject participated in all experimental conditions. Seven of them were diagnosed as borderline and seven as anti-social. Each subject responded to an experimental questionnaire which included hypothetical episodes about property crimes committed by two offenders. The subject was instructed to identify with one of the offenders. Three pieces of information were included in each episode: the intent of each of the two offenders and the size of the 'job.' All episodes derived from a complete factorial design were presented to each subject. In one replication the subject assigned blame to the offender with whom he identified, and in the other he assigned blame to the accomplice. Meaningful differences were found between the groups of prisoners, as reflected in the importance assigned to the three sources of information.*

There is very little experimental knowledge on career criminals' moral judgment. One exception is the study of Wolf, Battash, Addad and Walters (1992) which tested juvenile delinquents, using the framework of N. H. Anderson's (1981, 1982) Information Integration Theory and its methodological counterpart— Functional Measurement. The present study is an attempt to apply this theory as a framework for research on moral judgment among incarcerated offenders from a psychotherapeutic background. The theory, as applied to this field, deals with issues related to the importance assigned to different sources of information embedded in moral dilemmas. These sources of information include the intent of two parties to commit a robbery and, in the language of the offender, the size of the job. In particular, we are interested in the ability of borderline and anti-social inmates to relate to information beyond his/her egocentric space, i.e., the

intent of another person, provided that the subject identifies with one of the actors.

BORDERLINE AND ANTI-SOCIAL DISORDERS

Borderline Disorders. An individual with a borderline personality exhibits instability in a variety of domains, including interpersonal relations, mood and self-concept. Such an individual suffers from a chronic feeling of emptiness and finds it difficult to delay gratification. His/her interpersonal relations are characterized by taking advantage of and manipulating others (Meissner, 1978). The characteristic mechanism is called splitting, i.e., separation of a representation of self and objects with a subjective positive value from those perceived as negative. Such an individual creates a self concept and object concept which are not connected to reality, reflecting only that which is considered good and potent. When an object cannot serve as a source of gratification, it is perceived as bad. This is a primitive mechanism which does not permit one to develop a realistic relationship to the other or to the self. A person with a borderline personality tends to exhibit defensiveness about emotion (Kernberg, 1982). Just as a substitute object is perceived by the child as supplying a need, so do the needs of a borderline individual dictate how to perceive others.

Anti-Social Disorders. An anti-social personality involves avoidance of moral constraints which are set by society. An anti-social individual is impulsive and lacks consideration for the results one's actions may cause to others or to oneself (e.g., ICD.9.CM). Such a person is prone to pathologic lying and behaves as if nothing has been learned from experience. The verbal judgment of an anti-social individual is reasonable when the self is not taken into account. S/he uses rationalizations and excuses to convince others, while not showing any need for excuses, since no feeling of responsibility or guilt is evident. Interpersonal relations are defective, reflecting lack of an ability to love and to establish ties involving friendship. Anti-social people perceive others as instruments for the fulfillment of their own needs.

BORDERLINE AND ANTI-SOCIAL INMATES

The present work deals with the manner in which incarcerated offenders diagnosed as borderline or anti-social personalities, assign blame to themselves and to someone else for a criminal act. The theory of object relations assumes that only someone who has a solid representation of self and object is capable of perceiving self and other as separate individuals. According to Horner (1982), one's ability to perceive oneself as distinct from someone else indicates that separate representations for self and object have been developed. The theory states that representation of self

and object are related to the moral development of the individual. One's ability to share responsibility with someone else for some action should be influenced by the perception of self and other. The quality of object relations is indicative of the level of moral development, one's conscience being an amalgamation of object relations in childhood and an internalization of the morality of parents' morality (Minkowitz, 1961). Thus, the ability to perceive an interpersonal event as an experience in which two distinct individuals participate and for which they share responsibility is indicative of the level of development in terms of both object relations and morality.

A borderline individual lacks a feeling of personal identity and an ability to acquire a stable and appropriate representation of the object (Mahler, 1975). Thus, s/he is expected to exhibit a low level of object relations and moral development, which finds expression in a unidimensional perception of interpersonal events (Adelman, 1985).

An individual with an anti-social personality does not develop a distinction between human and non-human objects (e.g., Lowe, 1969). Thus, s/he too is characterized by internal representations which are said to show a lack of development of object relations.

MORAL JUDGMENT AMONG CRIMINALS

Object Relations. According to Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1969), the development of conscience brings with it a change in the child's perception of responsibility and blame. In the heteronomic stage, the child relates only to the act or to the results of the action, assigning responsibility and blame accordingly. In the autonomous stage, moral judgment is determined by the motivation, intent or circumstances which underlie the act. Heider (1967) also assumes different levels of development in the assignment of responsibility. At the lowest level, assignment of responsibility is total, and a person is held responsible for every result perceived as related to him/her. At the next level, impersonal causal relations begin to appear. At a more advanced stage, a person is considered responsible for all results which s/he should have envisioned. According to Heider, the two former stages are encompassed by Piaget's notion of objective responsibility. In the next stage, one is perceived as responsible for an act if and only if it involves intent to carry out such an act. In the final stage, justification for an act, motivations or intentions of an individual are not assigned to him/her alone; rather, circumstances and environmental causes also share a role in responsibility. These two levels are included in the Piagetian concept of subjective responsibility.

The subjects in the present study, characterized by social/moral deviance and psychopathology, are expected to make judgments like those on the lower end of the developmental scale (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget,

1965). Offender morality is expected to be based on judgment which simplifies the reality of the situation. Such morality is associated with low level of object relations.

Information Integration Theory. According to information integration theory (Anderson, 1981), a person takes in information from several sources when s/he relates or responds to any phenomenon. These bits of information first are subjectively weighted and later are integrated into a single judgment. Anderson (1991) proposes the following blame schema:

(1) Blame = Culpa \oplus Consequences

as part of common knowledge about actions that have actual or potentially undesirable consequences. The amount of blame is a function of the perceived level of the culpability of an actor for his/her act and the extent of negative consequences. A generalized integration operation on culpa and consequences is represented by the symbol \oplus . Culpa includes intention, personality disposition, prudence and foresight, obligation and duty and conflict of obligation. Consequences include objective and subjective results of an action, wrong acts, potential and multiple consequences.

Following functional measurement, the methodology derived from information integration theory, the subject is presented with a short narrative describing an incident which includes information from various sources, such as intent and damage. The subject is presented with episodes, each of which contains information from all relevant sources. The severity of the act or the level of punishment deserved is evaluated for each episode.

Information integration theory expects one to rely on various aspects of a given moral reality in judgments of anti-social behavior. Leon (1982) using this method found that young children took into account both intent and damage in their judgments of anti-social behavior. He describes the findings of 17 other studies which showed this same trend.

Hypotheses. The issue presented here raises the following question: In what way will a person with a criminal and psychotherapeutic background assign blame for carrying out a criminal act in which s/he and someone else have taken part? The literature presented above leads to the following two competing hypotheses with regard to the moral judgment of offenders from a psychotherapeutic background:

1. The judgmental reality will be simplified, the inmate assigning practically no importance to that portion of the relevant information which is beyond his egocentric space.
2. The judgment will take into account the complexity of the situation and importance will be assigned to all or most relevant pieces of information.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Fourteen male prison inmates, hospitalized in two psychiatric wards at a prison near Tel Aviv, Israel, participated (this hospitalization is defined here as psychotherapeutic background). All subjects underwent diagnoses by two prison psychiatrists, and the results were identical. Four of these subjects underwent further diagnoses by other psychiatrists who were not employed at the prison, and the conclusions were consistent. The subjects were divided into two groups according to the ICD.9.CM: borderline and anti-social. Both groups were comparable with regard to age, family status, national origin, number of siblings, level of formal education, army service and the type of crime committed. The seven borderline personality inmates were incarcerated for the first time. Four of the anti-social inmates were incarcerated for the first or second time, while the three remaining members of this group had been incarcerated four times or more. Assuming that frequency of incarceration involves a variety of experiences relevant to moral judgment, the anti-social subjects were further divided into two sub-groups. In addition, a comparison group, consisting of five inmates who had never received psychological treatment and who were serving terms for property crimes, was tested.

DESIGN, MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

Each subject was presented a series of episodes. Each episode contained three pieces of information. One dealt with "size of job." This notion prevails among criminals for acts of burglary, robbery and theft. Size of job had three levels: small, medium and big. The subject was asked to identify himself with one of the protagonists in the incidents. The level of motivation of the criminal with whom the subject identifies is depicted in the narrative as intent of Party A to do the job. The intent of Party B, the accomplice, was also depicted in the narrative in order to allow a comparison of how the subject relates to his own intent and to the intent of an accomplice. The intent of Party A and Party B had three levels: very much interested in pulling off the job, moderately interested in pulling off the job or not at all interested. For each incident the subject was provided with three pieces of information—size of job, intent of Party A and intent of Party B. He assigned blame to himself and to the accomplice. The episodes were presented to the subject in the form of narratives, as follows:

Imagine that you and someone else decided to pull off a (big/medium/small) job; to what extent are you to be blamed if it is clear that you were (much/somewhat/a little)

interested in pulling off the job and the partner was (much/somewhat/a little) interested in pulling it off?

Judgments were made on a graphic scale from 1 (not to blame) to 20 (very blameworthy). When the subject was asked to assign blame to someone else, the pronouns in the question put to the subject were reversed to read as follows: "To what extent was the partner to blame for the act if it was clear that he was (much/somewhat/a little) interested and you were (much/somewhat/a little) interested in carrying out the job?" The subject was asked to respond to 27 episodes, each including a combination of three different levels of the three sources of information, i.e., information about the interest of the party with whom he identified, information about the accomplice's interest in carrying out the job and information about the size of the job. This design is a modification of Schema 1 into the following blame schema:

(2) Blame = Intent of Party A \oplus Intent of Party B \oplus Size of job

This schema is likely to reveal whether the subject uses the same standard to judge someone else as he uses to judge himself.

The subjects had difficulty accepting nonfamiliar experimenters. Therefore, a clinical criminologist who worked with the prison inmates served as the experimenter, presenting the episodes to them orally.

Each subject participated individually in four sessions which were scheduled two weeks apart. In the first session the subject was asked to judge the extent of blame he would assign to Party A (himself) for each of the 27 episodes ("To what extent were you to blame"?). In the second session the subject judged the extent of blame he would assign to his accomplice ("How much is he to blame"?). In the two sessions which followed, the first two sessions were replicated. In each session, the 27 episodes were presented in a different arbitrary order.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

BORDERLINE GROUP

Figure 1 plots mean judgments (over the two replications of each mode of response—self blaming and blaming the accomplice) of the seven borderline subjects as a function of the intent of party A. The parameter is the intent of party B, each curve representing a different level of intent. The right, middle and left panels show the data for the different conditions of size of job: much, some and little, respectively. The upper and lower rows

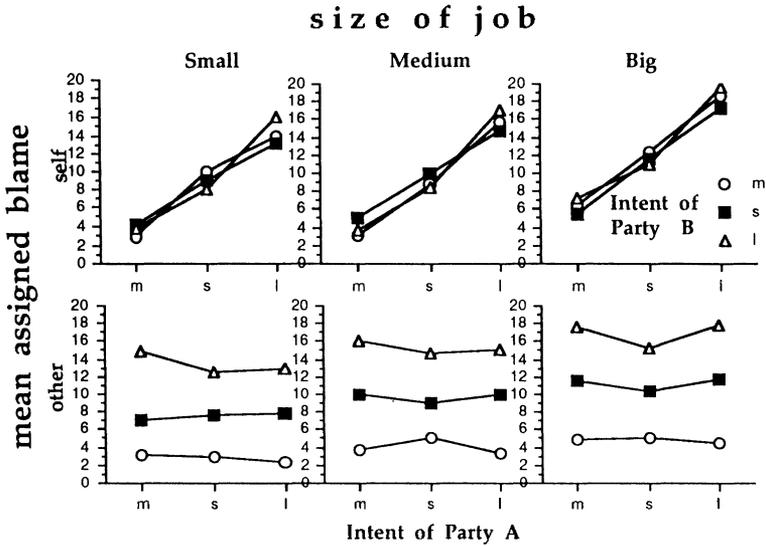


Figure 1 Mean assigned blame by borderline subjects as a function of information about the intent of the two parties and of the size of job

of panels represent the two modes of blame assigning, self and other, respectively.

There is an increase from left to right in the height of the graphic patterns in the upper portion of Figure 1. This means that self-assigned blame increased as the size of the job increased. In the lower panels of Figure 1, which represent blame assigned to the accomplice, a similar pattern emerges: blame assigned increased as a function of the size of the job. A three-way analysis of variance for repeated measures was conducted on the data. The effect for the size of the job was significant for blame assigned both to self and to other, $F(2, 6) = 8.2$ and 7.9 , respectively, $p < .01$.

In the self-blaming mode, the intent of Party A, with whom the subject identified himself, was assigned considerable importance. This is evident by the recognizable slope of the curves in the upper panels of Figure 1. This finding indicates that the borderline subjects assigned increasing amounts of blame as a function of an increase in intent to carry out the job, $F(2, 6) = 19.9$, $p < .01$. That all three curves were almost indistinguishable from one another in each of the three panels indicates that the intent of Party B did not play a meaningful role in blame assigned to self. This impression is supported by the insignificance of the main effect for this factor, $F(2, 6) < 1$.

In the 'other' blaming mode (see lower panels of Figure 1), the recognizable distance between the curves indicates that the intent of Party B played a meaningful role in blame assigned to the accomplice. The greater the perceived intent of Party B to carry out the job, the more blame assigned, $F(2, 6) = 19.37, p < .01$. In the lower panels, the lack of slope of the curves is indicative of the lack of influence of the intent of Party A in blame assigned to the accomplice. This impression is supported by the insignificance of the main effect for this factor, $F(2, 6) = 1.9, p > .05$.

Generally, the intent of Party A influenced assignment of blame only to 'self', while the intent of Party B influenced assignment of blame only to the accomplice. It is possible that the focus on only one party reflects a difficulty the borderline subject had in considering both himself and his partner in making judgments of blame. It should be noted, however, that the borderline subjects were able to relate to intentions of another person (see lower panels) as well as to size of job. This finding does not conform to the prevailing consensus about the mental functioning of borderline inmates with a psychotherapeutic background. An individual who suffers from borderline syndrome is said to focus in a child-like manner only on the most salient aspect of the stimuli presented to him. Here it has been shown that the borderline subjects related to the intent of the other party, which is not readily apparent and whose presence must be inferred indirectly. This does not conform with the uni-dimensional assumption which implies that a judge of this type is incapable of relating to the motivations of the person being judged.

RECIDIVIST AND NON-RECIDIVIST ANTI-SOCIAL INMATES

Figure 2 plots mean judgments of the four non-recidivist inmates, and Figure 3 plots the mean judgments of the three anti-social recidivist inmates. The judgments are plotted as a function of the intent of Party A. The parameter is the intent of party B, each curve representing a different level of intent. The right, middle and left panels show the data for the different conditions of size of job: much, some and little, respectively. The upper and lower rows of panels represent the two modes of blame assigning, self and other, respectively.

The present sample was not big enough to attain sufficient statistical power. Therefore, the following conclusions are based on visual inspection of the graphs in Figures 2 and 3. The findings are clear enough to merit such an analysis. The recognizable slope of the curves in the upper panels of Figure 2 (non-recidivists), which represent the data for assignment of blame to oneself, indicate that the non-recidivist subjects assigned importance to the intent of Party A, as was found for the borderline subjects. However,

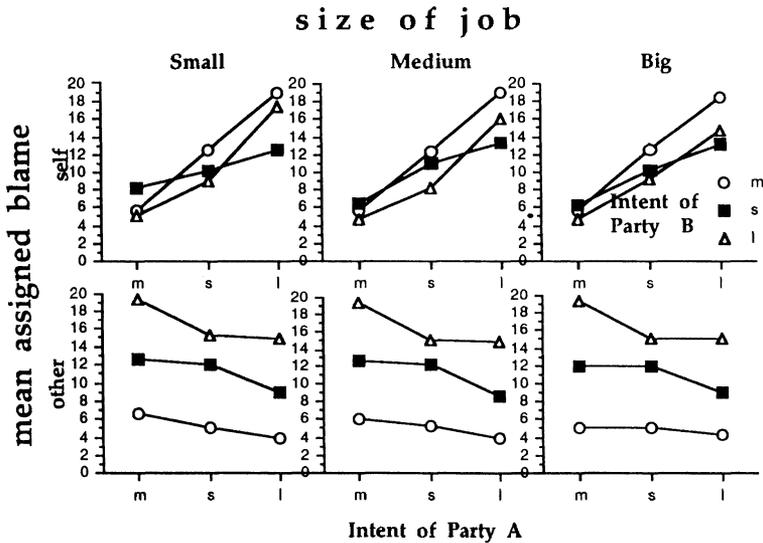


Figure 2 Mean assigned blame by antisocial subjects with fewer incarcerations as a function of information about the intent of the two parties and of the size of job

these anti-social subjects also assigned importance to the intent of the accomplice in the crime, who was not the object of judgment. This is reflected in the distance between the curves in the three uppermost panels of Figure 2. This distance was three (or more) times greater than the distance between the curves in the upper panels of Figure 1.

In the lower panels of Figure 2, the slight slope of the curves indicates that when the accomplice was the object of blame, importance was assigned to him as well as to the actor himself. This graph does not show evidence of the importance of the size of the job for blame assigned both to self and other. This picture reveals a more socially-oriented judgmental approach for the anti-social non-recidivist inmates than for the borderline prisoners, as depicted in Figure 1.

The judgments of the anti-social recidivist subjects, portrayed in Figure 3, do not show signs of such a social trend. These subjects, like the borderline inmates, assigned blame only to the party to whom their attention was directed. The recognizable slope of the curves and the lack of distance between them in the upper panels of Figure 3 indicate that for assignment of blame to self, only the intent of Party A, along with a certain degree of importance for the size of the job, played a significant role in judgment of self. In this light, the noticeable distance between the curves in the lower panels of Figure 3 and their lack of slope indicate that importance was assigned to the intent of Party B and not to the intent of Party A. The

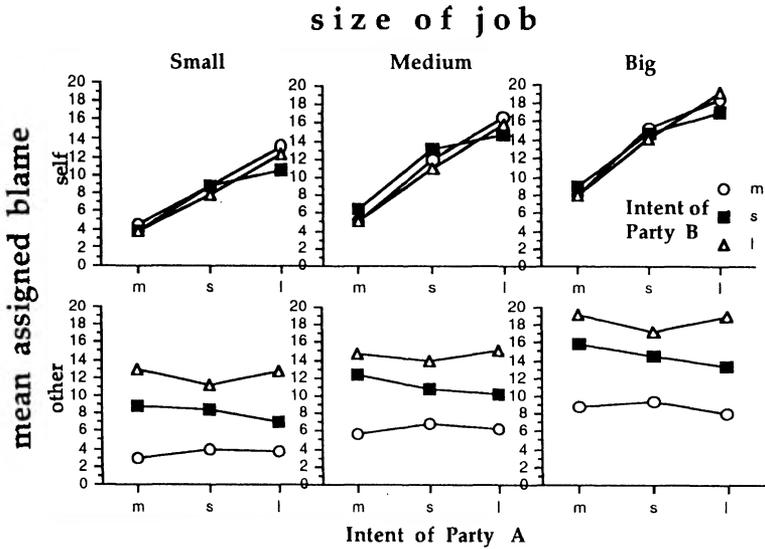


Figure 3 Mean assigned blame by antisocial subjects with a history of incarcerations as a function of information about the intent of the two parties and of the size of job

difference in the height of the three graphs in both the upper and lower panels indicates that in the two modes of judgment, self and other, the importance of the size of the job was noticeable.

It can be concluded that the anti-social recidivist subjects assigned blame primarily to the object of blame (in legal terms, the defendant) and ascribed minimal importance to the other social component, i.e. the intent of the accomplice. These findings may be a reflection of moral perceptions which prevail in the criminal subculture to which the subjects belong. The finding for the non-recidivist anti-social inmates shows that they assigned importance to the partner in the criminal act who was not the object of blame.

One possible interpretation for these findings is that repeated incarceration indicates a kind of pathology, one reflection of which is evident in the domain of social morality, as was documented among the borderline inmates.

INMATES WITHOUT A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC BACKGROUND

Figure 4 plots mean judgments of the five inmates with no clinical history, as a function of the intent of party A. The parameter is the intent of party B, each curve representing a different level of intent. The right,

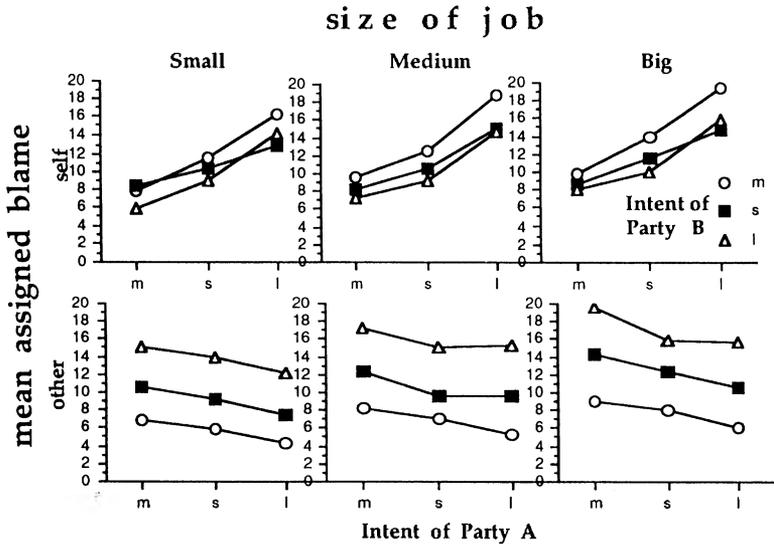


Figure 4 Mean assigned blame by the subjects with no psychotherapeutic background as a function of information about the intent of the two parties and of the size of job

middle, and left panels show the data for the different conditions of size of job: much, some and little, respectively. The upper and lower rows of panels represent the two modes of blame assigning, self and other, respectively.

The height of all three graphs in both the upper and lower panels indicates that these inmates, who were serving time for property crimes, did not assign much importance to the size of the job. Thus, in contrast to the inmates with a psychotherapeutic background, these subjects did not see much relevance in the external aspects of the episodes presented to them for judgment. The noticeable slope in the curves of the upper panels of Figure 4 and the distance between them indicate that self-blame of these inmates was based primarily on the intent of Party A and to some extent on the intent of Party B. In the same light, as indicated by the large distance between the curves in the lower panels and their slight slope, blame assigned to the accomplice was based primarily on the intent of Party B and to some extent on the intent of Party A.

Since these prisoners partially ignored the external circumstances of the anti-social episode, i.e., the size of the job, it can be concluded that their judgments related only to the social aspects of the episode, i.e., the intent of the two partners to the crime. These findings may reflect criminal moral perceptions, as follows:

1. Assignment of blame to the object of judgment, while ignoring the accomplice, and assignment of no importance to size of job, as reported for the borderline and anti-social recidivist subjects.
2. Assignment of primary blame to the object of judgment, along with more moderate blame to the accomplice and assignment of no importance to size of job, as reported for the non-recidivist anti-social prisoners.
3. Assignment of blame to both parties, while partially ignoring size of job, as reported for the inmates with no clinical history.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

RECIDIVIST ANTI-SOCIAL INMATES

It was found that several sources of information were assigned considerable importance in the process of moral judgment by prisoners with a psychotherapeutic background. Size of the job and intention to carry it out were valued as meaningful and were integrated into one observable and quantifiable judgment, even by borderline subjects.

People who suffer from this psychopathology are described in the literature as suffering from problems in discriminating and synthesizing different pieces of information. This finding disagrees with the unidimensional prediction derived from the object relations approach. It supports the hypothesis derived from information integration theory that moral judgment is based on several sources of information. It was found, however, that the borderline and the recidivist antisocial subjects assigned importance only to the intent of one of the two partners to the crime. According to the object relations approach, this finding implies that for these subjects, with criminal and psychotherapeutic backgrounds, interpersonal relationships do not involve two different partners who share responsibility for a common act.

From a social perspective, this finding points to problems in the perception of self and other in a comprehensive perception of interpersonal relationships. Borderline people and borderline prisoners in particular seem to approach other people instrumentally and have problems in developing relationships beyond the self.

The judgmental pattern of the recidivist anti-social subjects was similar to that of the borderline subjects. This can be taken as support for the well established distinction between primary psychopathology, which involves a complete lack of anxiety, and secondary psychopathology which involves anxiety (Lykken, 1957). Repeated arrests by these subjects may be symptomatic of psychopathology with anxiety. One possible interpretation for the interaction between recidivism and anxiety in this context is that it is

indicative of psychopathology. Such psychopathology might combine elements of borderline and anti-social syndrome. It may be suggested that the psychopathology of anti-social recidivist makes a criminal less sophisticated and less prone to self-victimization. In this way he is more vulnerable to law enforcement personnel. In support of that assumption, therapists in the Israeli prison where this study was conducted have found a combination of borderline and anti-social symptoms in several prisoners who suffer from impulsiveness.

NON-RECIDIVIST NON-HOSPITALIZED INMATES

The non-recidivist anti-social subjects assigned importance to the intention of both parties. This tendency was stronger in assigning blame to themselves, while for the subjects with no clinical history the tendency was stronger in assigning blame to another person. For both groups the ability to base their moral judgments on information about different social parties seems more developed than that of the borderline and the anti-social recidivists.

There is a gap between the judgment and behavior of the non-recidivist anti-social subjects, i.e., between their relatively developed judgmental pattern and the behavior which brought them to prison.

Addad (in press) proposes a distinction between internal and external morality. Internal morality is defined as a product of a developmental process involving assimilation of a value system. External morality is a product of absorption of judgmental schema without incorporation of a value system. Thus, the moral judgments of non-recidivist anti-social subjects and those without a psychotherapeutic background might reflect judgmental patterns typical of external morality.

In terms of object relations, the judgmental pattern of the prisoners without psychotherapeutic backgrounds seems more developed than that of the other subjects, since they were able to differentiate between the different sources of information in assigning blame to another person. Such a pattern may reflect neurotic rigid superego (Stein, 1969). Chessick (1972) notes that the object relations of a neurotic personality are more developed than those of the borderline personality. The present findings might indicate that regular criminals combine a high level of object relations and severe self-judgment within a quasi-neuritic personality.

METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Information Integration Theory and the method of Functional Measurement have been successfully applied for the study of moral judgment by

juvenile delinquents. The present study exemplifies the applicability of this framework to prisoners with and without a psychotherapeutic background. Functional measurement can serve as a means to unravel issues dealing with valuation of moral information by criminals who suffer from psychopathology. The findings are consistent with the literature on borderline and anti-social personalities. At the same time they point to specific implications for the understanding of psychopathology in prisoners. In this way the findings validate both the relevant psychodiagnostic literature and the method of functional measurement. This method provides a paradigm which operationalizes questions on how various sources of moral evidence are integrated into one observable and quantifiable response.

It is recommended that this paradigm be applied to the testing of moral judgment by non-incarcerated criminals and non-criminals with borderline and anti-social disorders. Such an examination would require development of a functional measurement questionnaire based on the terminology of everyday life, recalling that the present tool was based on the everyday life terminology of prisoners.

The present findings show that the judgmental pattern of recidivist prisoners is similar to that of the borderline prisoners. This points to the possibility that both groups may belong to a unique criminal population which has not yet been identified. An attempt to outline the definition of such a population might prove useful. That attempt can be based on the method of functional measurement, which may assist in developing a tool for discriminant diagnosis between inmates who belong to the new population and non-recidivist anti-social prisoners. This should provide a useful therapeutic tool as well, since different symptomatologies require different treatments. It can be hypothesized that anxiety-ridden patients, who should be more sensitive, might gain from psychotherapy more than non-recidivist anti-social patients who do not suffer from anxiety. The prognosis for the latter is not promising.

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