

THE ROLE OF MALADAPTIVE COGNITIVE SCHEMAS IN DECISION MAKING IN OFFENDERS CHARGED WITH MURDER

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Abstract: This research aims to highlight the role and the importance of maladaptive cognitive schemas in the decision-making process of prisoners accused of murder, trying to outline the particularities of the criminal behavior profile. The sample consisted of 280 inmates charged with murder. The data were collected using the Young Cognitive Schema Questionnaire in the short form (YSQ-S3) and the Cognitive Assessment System (Analytic Reasoning; Decision-making capacity). The obtained results showed that cognitive schemas have a direct influence on the decision-making process in criminal behavior.

Keywords: maladaptive cognitive schemas, decision, murder.

INTRODUCTION

The present research aims to explore the influence that maladaptive schemas have on the decision-making capacity in murder, starting from numerous studies that addressed the issue of cognitive schemas in people with a criminal history [1].

The pattern in murder presents a series of personality traits, grounding on antisocial behavior theory, which implies a personality vulnerability characterized by mood disorders, low self-control and difficulties with controlling impulses and dysfunctional negative emotions [2]. Individuals with low self-control and tolerance capacity for uncertain conditions tend to increase emotional distress, generating blockages mediated by dysfunctional maladaptive emotions that are indicators of mental or personality vulnerability [3]. From the perspective of cognitive theories, the cognitive schema is an abstract representation of the particularities of a context or a situation, which helps the individual to explain an event and the related experience, guiding perception and responses [4]. These mental structures are organized and adapted to the realities of everyone [5]. All the information stored in the individual's

memory is organized in cognitive schemes [6]. Social and family factors represent the foundation of the development of maladaptive cognitive schemas against the background of a vulnerable personality. Maladaptive cognitive schemas are considered trait-like, enduring beliefs about oneself and the world, that are rooted in early childhood experiences [7]. These schemas are responsible for information assessment and are involved in directing the decision makers actions [8].

Numerous studies in the field of cognitive psychology but also in the forensic field have addressed the issue of cognitive schemes in individuals who have committed crimes. It was found that maladaptive cognitive schemes involve perceptual distortion, which causes false perceptions and a rationalization of the antisocial behaviors shown. [9] The decision-making process of the murderer is also influenced by the need for control, determined by the lack of emotional control, which can lead to the criminal act due to the criminal and social consequences, as well as in relation to their victims [10]. Specialized studies confirm the main role of the family as a primary socializing environment that favors juvenile delinquency. The main role of the family is to build the child's value system, so that it integrates

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into social life. Parents offer as a model a behavioral pattern that has a decisive influence on children's perception and mental and emotional balance. Thus, the individual learns how to relate to social values and norms. [11, 12]. Other similar studies deal with aspects regarding the clinical picture of the maladaptive schemas of a decision maker that can explain the act of committing a crime [13-15].

Starting from the studies related to the factors involved in juvenile delinquency as well as the factors favouring criminal acts, the present paper addressed the problem of maladaptive cognitive schemes from the perspective of their influence on the decision-making act. An attempt was made to explore the existence of potential associations between cognitive schemas and the decision-making process in prisoners accused of murder.

Participants

The present study included 280 (N=380) adult participants with a criminal record, inmates accused of murder, of whom 50.5% were male and 49.5% female. The mean age was 35.13 (SD=10.99, Min. 18, Max. 62). The mean obtained for analytical reasoning (0-24) was 9.2 (SD=3.31, Min 8, Max 12) and for decision-making capacity the mean obtained was (Table 1).

Instruments

In order to collect the data, the Young Cognitive Schema Questionnaire in the short form (YSQ-S3) and the Cognitive Assessment System (Analytic Reasoning; Decision-making capacity) were used.

PROCEDURE

Data processing

Her data were processed using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Science) version 2.6. Descriptive statistics and correlation test were performed. The significance level is set to $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

Assessment of analytical reasoning, decision-making capacity and maladaptive cognitive schemas in prisoners accused of murder

The descriptive statistical analysis concerned the assessment of analytical reasoning 9.2 (SD=3.31, Min 8, Max 12). and decision-making capacity 4.8 (SD=1.16, Min 2, Max 9). Also, the following maladaptive cognitive schemes were selected: Emotional deprivation (ED), abandonment (AB), Mistrust/Abuse (MA), Social Isolation (SI), Defectiveness/Shame (DS), Social undesirability (SI), Failure (FA), Dependence/ Incompetence (DI), Vulnerability to harm (VH), Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self (EM), Subjugation (SB), Self-sacrifice (SS), Emotional inhibition (EI), Unrelating standards/ Hypercriticalness (US), Unentitlement, insufficient Self control, Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking (AS), Negativity/ Pessimism (NP), Punitiveness (PU). Table 1 includes descriptive indices for each cognitive scheme introduced in the research.

The descriptive analysis highlighted the fact that the means on the scales Self-sacrifice (SS), Subjugation (SB), Vulnerability to harm

Table 1. Sample composition by analytical reasoning, decision-making capacity, and maladaptive cognitive schemas

Maladaptive cognitive schema	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Emotional deprivation (ED)	280	7	11	8.6	1.12
Abandonment / Instability (AB)	280	6	10	8.2	1.28
Mistrust/Abuse (MA)	280	8	16	11.42	2.01
Social Isolation (SI)	280	7	22	11.18	4.03
Defectiveness/Shame (DS)	280	2	7	5.27	0.13
Failure (FA),	280	7	23	9.02	1.85
Dependence/ Incompetence (DI)	280	5	12	6.93	3.17
Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self (EM)	280	8	17	9.34	2.23
Vulnerability to harm (VH)	280	3	5	4.48	1.96
Subjugation (SB)	280	2	5	3.42	2.65
Self-sacrifice (SS)	280	6	13	6.25	3.44
Emotional inhibition (EI)	280	8	22	12.08	2.95
Unrelating standards/ Hypercriticalness (US)	280	4	9	5.81	1.02
Entitlement/Grandiosity (ET)	280	12	20	16.12	3.94
Insufficient Self control/ Self-Discipline (IS)	280	10	28	15.20	4.66
Approval-Seeking / Recognition-Seeking (AS)	280	20	42	31.04	5.19
Negativity/ Pessimism (NP)	280	16	46	29.53	4.32
Punitiveness (PU)	280	30	48	37.62	7.19

or illness (VH), Dependence/ Incompetence (DI), Defectiveness/ Shame (DS) indicate a low level according to the normative table. Averages obtained on the scales Emotional deprivation (ED), Abandonment/ Instability (AB), Mistrust/Abuse (MA), Social Isolation (SI), Failure (FA), Emotional Inhibition, Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking (AS), Negativity / Pessimism (NP) indicates an average level according to the normative table. The means of the Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self (EM), Insufficient Self-Control/ Entitlement/ Grandiosity (ET), Self-Discipline (IS), Punitiveness (PU) scales indicate a high level according to the normative table.

The influence of maladaptive schemas on analytical reasoning in inmates charged with murder

A correlational study was conducted in order to investigate the existence of associations between analytical reasoning and maladaptive schemas. (Table 2). Significant correlations were highlighted between analytical reasoning and Mistrust/Abuse ($r=0.242$; $p=0.015$), Social isolation ($r=0.691$; $p=0.032$); Failure ($r=0.117$; $p=0.023$); Vulnerability to harm or illness (VH) ($r=0.802$; $p=0.000$), Enmeshment/Undeveloped self (EM) ($r=0.829$; $p=0.000$), Emotional Inhibition (EI) ($r=0.168$; $p=0.036$), Entitlement /Grandiosity (ET) ($r=0.692$; $p=0.028$), Insufficient self control (IS) ($r=0.809$; $p=0.000$), Negativity/ Pessimism (NP) (r

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between analytical reasoning and maladaptive cognitive schemas and the threshold significance

Maladaptive cognitive schema	Pearson Correlation coefficient (r)	Sig. (p)
Emotional deprivation (ED)	.361	.251
Abandonment / Instability (AB)	.403	.162
Mistrust/Abuse (MA)	.242*	.015
Social Isolation/Alienation (SI)	.691*	.032
Defectiveness/Shame (DS)	.294*	.041
Failure (FA)	.117*	.023
Dependence/ Incompetence (DI)	.393	.115
Vulnerability to harm or illness (VH)	.802**	.000
Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self (EM)	.829**	.000
Subjugation (SB)	.490	.097
Self-sacrifice (SS)	.196	.318
Emotional inhibition (EI)	.168	.036
Unrelenting standards/ Hypercriticalness (US)	.389	.089
Entitlement/Grandiosity (ET)	.692*	.028
Insufficient Self-Control/ Self-Discipline (IS)	.809**	.000
Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking (AS)	.466	.106
Negativity / Pessimism (NP)	.644*	.038
Punitiveness (PU)	.498*	.019

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between decision making and maladaptive cognitive schemas

Maladaptive cognitive schema	Correlation coefficient (r)	Sig. (p)
Emotional deprivation (ED)	.214	.251
Abandonment / Instability (AB)	.129*	.012
Mistrust/Abuse (MA)	.537**	.000
Social Isolation/Alienation (SI)	.429**	.000
Defectiveness/Shame (DS)	.035	.492
Failure (FA)	.191**	.000
Dependence/ Incompetence (DI)	.042	.417
Vulnerability to harm or illness (VH)	.458**	.000
Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self (EM)	.841**	.000
Subjugation (SB)	.028	.581
Self-sacrifice (SS)	.056	.275
Emotional inhibition (EI)	.427**	.000
Unrelenting standards/ Hypercriticalness (US)	.076	.141
Entitlement/Grandiosity (ET)	.124*	.016
Insufficient Self-Control/ Self-Discipline (IS)	.584**	.000
Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking (AS)	.103*	.046
Negativity / Pessimism (NP)	.422**	.000
Punitiveness (PU)	.665**	.000

=0.644; $p=0.038$), Punitiveness (PU) ($r=0.898$; $p=0.001$)

No significant correlations were found between analytical reasoning and Emotional deprivation (ED), Abandonment/Instability (AB), Defectiveness/Shame (DS), Dependence/Incompetence (DI), Subjugation (SB), Self-Sacrifice (SS), Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness (US), Approval Seeking/Recognition-Seeking (AS).

The influence of maladaptive schemas on decision-making in inmates charged with murder

The statistical analysis sought to highlight the existence of correlations between decision-making capacity and maladaptive cognitive schemes (Table 3). Significant correlations were identified between decision-making capacity and Emotional Deprivation (ED) ($r=0.214$; $p=0.000$), Abandonment/Instability ($r=0.129$; $p=0.012$), Mistrust/Abuse ($r=0.537$; $p=0.000$), Social isolation/Alienation (SI) ($r=0.429$; $p=0.000$); Failure ($r=0.191$; $p=0.000$); Vulnerability to harm or illness (VH) ($r=0.458$; $p=0.000$), Enmeshment/Undeveloped self (EM) ($r=0.841$; $p=0.000$), Emotional Inhibition (EI) ($r=0.427$; $p=0.000$), Entitlement / Grandiosity (ET) ($r=0.124$; $p=0.016$), Insufficient self control (IS) ($r=0.584$; $p=0.000$), Approval-Seeking/Recognition (AS) ($r=0.103$; $p=0.046$), Negativity/Pessimism (NP) ($r=0.422$; $p=0.000$), Punitiveness (PU) ($r=0.665$; $p=0.000$)

No significant correlations were found between decision-making ability and Defectiveness/Shame (DS), Dependence/Incompetence (DI), Subjugation (SB), Self-Sacrifice (SS), Unrelenting Standards/Hypercriticalness (US).

DISCUSSION

Following the descriptive evaluation, it was observed that the prisoners accused of murder present very rigid maladaptive schemes such as Emotional deprivation (ED), Abandonment / Instability (AB), Mistrust/Abuse (MA), Social Isolation (SI), Failure (FA), Emotional Inhibition, Approval-Seeking / Recognition-Seeking (AS), Negativity / Pessimism (NP) Enmeshment / Undeveloped Self (EM) Insufficient Self-Control / Entitlement / Grandiosity (ET), Self-Discipline (IS), Punitiveness (PU).

Data analysis showed that these maladaptive schemas are associated both with analytical reasoning and with the decision-making capacity of inmates accused of murder. These are schemas developed from early childhood, determined by the relationship with

the parents, as well as by the environment of origin, respectively the educational level. In most cases, they are precarious and do not allow the shaping of a value system corresponding to social requirements. These factors associated with potential traumatic events, contribute to the perceptual distortion of the individual [16], favoring the manifestation of criminal behavior. [17].

The statistical analysis showed that the sample does not significantly show the feeling that one is bad, unwanted, inferior, in important respects; or that one would be unlovable to significant others, the belief that one has failed and will inevitably fail in areas of achievement, so he is stupid, lower in status, or less successful than others, belief that one needs considerable help from others to handle one's everyday responsibilities in a competent manner, Exaggerated fear that imminent illnesses, emotional or external catastrophe will strike at any time and that one will be unable to prevent it, suppression of one's preferences, decisions, desires and suppression of emotional expression, especially anger usually to avoid the abandonment, excessive focus on voluntarily meeting the needs of others in daily situations, at the expense of one's own gratification.

Early childhood beliefs are feelings that others don't offer us the nurturance, empathy and protection we need, the feeling that the close ones will not be able to emotionally support us, or to protect us and they will abandon us in favour of someone better, the belief that in the end, the others will intentionally hurt, abuse, humiliate, cheat, lie, manipulate, or take advantage on us, the feeling of being different from others and not being part of any group, the excessive emotional involvement and closeness with one or more significant others (often parents), at the expense of independence and normal social development, inhibition of anger, inhibition of positive impulses, difficulty expressing vulnerability or communicating freely about one's feelings, needs and excessive emphasis on rationality while disregarding emotions, the belief that one is superior to other people, that claim the right to do or have whatever want, regardless of what is realistic, or the cost to others, all this in order to get control and power, the difficulty to practice self-control and discipline to achieve one's personal goals, or to restrain the excessive expression of one's emotions and impulses, the excessive desire to maintain the comfort and to avoid unpleasant situations, excessive emphasis on gaining approval, recognition, attention from other people, the one's sense of esteem is dependent

on the reactions of others, the excessive focus on the negative aspects of life and minimizing or neglecting the positive aspects and the belief that people should be punished for making mistakes. These have beliefs that strongly favour the commission of crimes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the influence of maladaptive cognitive schemas in decision making actions in prisoners accused of murder. The obtained results indicate that beliefs developed in early childhood can have a significant role in the decision-making process of the criminal accused of murder.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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