

AGGRESSIVE OFFENDERS' COGNITION Theory, Research, and Practice

Edited by

Theresa A. Gannon

University of Kent, UK

Tony Ward

Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

Anthony R. Beech

University of Birmingham, UK

and

Dawn Fisher

Llanarth Court Hospital & University of Birmingham, UK



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AGGRESSIVE OFFENDERS' COGNITION

WILEY SERIES IN
FORENSIC CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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To my parents, Fiona and John Gannon for making
my education possible – TAG.

To my mentors: Bill Marshall and Richard Laws – TW.

For my Mother and Father – AB.

To my family – human, canine and equine – DF.

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

ABOUT THE SERIES

At the time of writing it is clear that we live in a time, certainly in the UK and other parts of Europe, if perhaps less so in areas of the world, when there is renewed enthusiasm for constructive approaches to working with offenders to prevent crime. What do we mean by this statement and what basis do we have for making it?

First, by 'constructive approaches to working with offenders' we mean bringing the use of effective methods and techniques of behaviour change into work with offenders. Indeed, this view might pass as a definition of forensic clinical psychology. Thus, our focus is the application of theory and research in order to develop practice aimed at bringing about a change in the offender's functioning. The word *constructive* is important and can be set against approaches to behaviour change that seek to operate by destructive means. Such destructive approaches are typically based on the principles of deterrence and punishment, seeking to suppress the offender's actions through fear and intimidation. A constructive approach, on the other hand, seeks to bring about changes in an offender's functioning that will produce, say, enhanced possibilities of employment, greater levels of self-control, better family functioning, or increased awareness of the pain of victims.

A constructive approach faces the criticism of being a 'soft' response to the damage caused by offenders, neither inflicting pain and punishment nor delivering retribution. This point raises a serious question for those involved in working with offenders. Should advocates of constructive approaches oppose retribution as a goal of the criminal justice system as a process that is incompatible with treatment and rehabilitation? Alternatively, should constructive work with offenders take place within a system given to retribution? We believe that this issue merits serious debate.

However, to return to our starting point, history shows that criminal justice systems are littered with many attempts at constructive work with offenders, not all of which have been successful. In raising the spectre of success, the second part of our opening sentence now merits attention: that is, 'constructive approaches to working with offenders *to prevent crime*'. In order to achieve the goal of preventing crime, interventions must focus on the right targets for behaviour change.

In addressing this crucial point, Andrews and Bonta (1994) have formulated the *need principle*:

Many offenders, especially high-risk offenders, have a variety of needs. They need places to live and work and/or they need to stop taking drugs. Some have poor self-esteem, chronic headaches or cavities in their teeth. These are all 'needs'. The need principle draws our attention to the distinction between *criminogenic* and *noncriminogenic* needs. Criminogenic needs are a subset of an offender's risk level. They are dynamic attributes of an offender that, when changed, are associated with changes in the probability of recidivism. Non-criminogenic needs are also dynamic and changeable, but these changes are not necessarily associated with the probability of recidivism. (p.176)

Thus, successful work with offenders can be judged in terms of bringing about change in noncriminogenic need *or* in terms of bringing about change in criminogenic need. While the former is important and, indeed, may be a necessary precursor to offence-focused work, it is changing criminogenic need that, we argue, should be the touchstone in working with offenders. While, as noted above, the history of work with offenders is not replete with success, the research base developed since the early 1990s, particularly the meta-analyses (e.g. Lösel, 1995), now strongly supports the position that effective work with offenders to prevent further offending is possible. The parameters of such evidence-based practice have become well established and widely disseminated under the banner of '*What Works*' (McGuire, 1995).

It is important to state that we are not advocating that there is only one approach to preventing crime. Clearly there are many approaches, with different theoretical underpinnings, that can be applied to the task of reducing offending. Nonetheless, a tangible momentum has grown in the wake of the '*What Works*' movement as academics, practitioners, and policy makers seek to capitalise on the possibilities that this research raises for preventing crime. The task now facing many service agencies lies in translating the research into effective practice.

Our aim in developing this Series in Forensic Clinical Psychology is to produce texts that review research and draw on clinical expertise to advance effective work with offenders. We are both committed to the ideal of evidence-based practice and we will encourage contributors to the Series to follow this approach. Thus, the books published in the Series will not be practice manuals or 'cook books': they will offer readers authoritative and critical information through which forensic clinical practice can develop. We are both enthusiastic about the contribution to effective practice that this Series can make and look forward to continuing to develop it even further in the years to come.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Following the dissemination of the '*What Works*' research a great deal of work with offenders has adopted a cognitive-behavioural approach to practice. This cognitive-behavioural orientation has become increasingly evident in a range of programmes aimed at a wide diversity of offenders and types of offending

(Hollin & Palmer, 2006). A cognitive-behavioural approach to both theory and practice seeks to understand human behaviour, including offending, in terms of a complex interplay between the three elements of environment, cognition, and action (Bandura, 1977; 1986). Understanding the complexities of the relationships between these three elements relies on a research base that elucidates the individual properties of each of the three individual elements.

In this addition to the Series, Theresa Gannon, Tony Ward, Anthony Beech, and Dawn Fisher have focussed on cognition and, even more precisely, cognition in the context of aggressive offenders. They have gathered and edited a collection of contributions, written by researchers and practitioners, that seeks to review extant knowledge, ask new questions, and speak to practice. The scope of the text is wide, ranging from sex offences against children to domestic abuse; from cognitive distortions to moral cognition; and to the treatment of angry aggression. Given such a range of coverage, this book can justifiably claim to present the 'state of the art' with regard to current knowledge of cognition in aggressive offenders. Further, the emphasis on using the research base to inform a rapidly developing area of forensic practice will be welcomed by all those engaged in working with aggressive offenders.

Clive Hollin
Mary McMurran

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PREFACE

This edited collection originated in a coffee shop in Wellington, New Zealand, where the first two editors were working and where the latter two later came to visit. It became clear to us all – from working and teaching in the area of offender cognition – that professionals and students were forced to consult numerous piecemeal chapters and papers on the topic, as no single textbook synthesised the material needed into one readily accessible resource. From this realisation we began to approach leading professionals involved in various aspects of aggressive offenders' cognition, about whether they would be interested in writing a chapter for a book devoted to offender cognition. The response that we received was overwhelmingly enthusiastic and we feel privileged to edit a text of special interest to us with such a group of enthusiastic and informed professionals. The strength of this book – we hope – lies in its structure. Each offender population is treated separately, allowing readers to compare and contrast developments, knowledge and practice across sexual offending, general violence and domestic violence. We hope that professionals involved and interested in this area will use this text, not only as a reference but also to further develop an area that is beginning to gain powerful momentum.

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INTRODUCTION

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Studying how the human mind works is always fascinating; perhaps even more so when a person's behaviour is at odds with legal and moral conventions. In fact, even the most lifeless of dinner parties can be reignited by idle talk of the latest high profile offender: "Why did he do it?" "What must he have been thinking?" "He must be really messed up in the head." Yet behind such questions lies an important assumption that plays a pivotal role in the theoretical underpinnings of forensic psychology. Put simply, the majority of theories proposed to explain aggressive offending assert that offenders' thinking at the time of their offence is deviant, abnormal, and offence-supportive.

From an academic perspective, the term "cognition" refers to the basic operations involved in human perception, memory and thinking (Solso, 1998). For example, how do we perceive a written question, interpret its meaning, think about a possible answer to that question and ultimately select and implement a verbal response? (Solso, 1998). All aspects of these operations involve a complex interplay of perceptual (e.g., attention), thinking (e.g., concept formulation) and memory processes (e.g., retention, retrieval). These processes have been investigated by

cognitive psychologists utilising a wide range of methodologies and have resulted in immense payoffs of knowledge production (e.g., Broadbent, 1958; Chomsky, 1968; Loftus, 1979/1996; Posner, 1980). More recently, however, psychology has become interested in understanding these processes when individuals interact with each other.

The term “social-cognition” refers to the study of social or interpersonal relationships using the knowledge and methods derived from basic cognitive psychology. In other words, social cognition aims to explain how people perceive themselves and others, interpret the meaning of interpersonal behaviour, think about the possible answer to a social problem and choose a behavioural response to that social problem.

A cognitive construct of paramount importance for investigating such social-cognitive questions is that of the *schema*. A schema may be conceptualised as a structured framework of knowledge – stored in long-term memory – that contains information and knowledge associated together from prior experience and learning (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Huesmann, 1998). Thus, a schema relating to a particular concept (e.g., children) will contain information concerning characteristics or core attributes (e.g., naïve, innocent) and about the relationships between such attributes and behaviours (e.g., how this naivety relates to a child’s tendency to ask socially unacceptable and sometimes very embarrassing and public questions). Each individual’s unique variety of schemas provides her or him with the capacity to describe, interpret and predict that individual’s own and other people’s behaviour.

When resources and time are plentiful, individuals can and do interpret their own and others’ behaviours in a rational and careful manner (i.e., they behave as *naïve scientists*; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Most often, however, individuals behave as *cognitive misers*. Put simply, individuals perceive their complicated and rather ambiguous world through reliance on pre-existing schemas (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, when dealing with a situation that is similar to one encountered previously, individuals use their pre-existing schemas (largely unconsciously) to predict how others will behave and how they themselves should behave (Williams *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, everyday social encounters provide rich opportunities for schema rehearsal, which subsequently strengthen the links between associated knowledge units and increase schema accessibility (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). If a particular schema is rehearsed and supported regularly, it is likely to become *chronically accessible*. In other words, it is highly likely that such a schema will be used to interpret and guide social behaviour in the future (Pettit, Polaha & Mize, 2001). Research suggests that schemas – including those that are chronically accessible – are highly affected by situational priming (e.g., Bargh, 1982; Bargh, Lombardi & Higgins, 1988; Tiedens, 2001). This is probably because situational primes such as positive or negative affective states reduce the individual’s ability to perceive the world carefully and rationally (Kardes, 1994). A variety of situational primes are likely to affect an individual’s ability to process information rationally, including sexual arousal, anger, excitement, alcohol and drug use. Such primes increase individuals’ reliance on pre-existing schemas, leading them to attend preferentially to schema-supportive information, ignore or minimise disconfirming evidence and interpret ambiguous social information in

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