

Personality Profiling of Juvenile Delinquents through Thematic Apperception Test

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ABSTRACT

Personality is a relatively stable pattern of behavior, thoughts, or actions that distinguish one person from another. The present study aims to profile the personality of juvenile delinquents using a projective technique to develop a perspective on the relationships between the individual characteristics and the array of crime committed by juvenile offenders. The study followed a qualitative design using Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) for the collection of data. The sample consisted of five male juvenile delinquents belonging to the age range of 16–18 years in Delhi. The data were analyzed using Leopold Bellack's method of TAT analysis. The findings indicated that most of the people involved in criminal activities face relationship issues either with the family members or with peers. Social and cultural factors have emerged to be some of the major contributors to the act of delinquency by juveniles. The study can be replicated in schools and correctional homes to identify the psychopathic traits and develop appropriate strategies to reform the personality of the juveniles.

Key words: Juvenile delinquents, personality, thematic apperception test

INTRODUCTION

The psychological concept of “personality” has been defined as a relatively stable pattern of behavior, thoughts, or actions that distinguish one person from another.^[1] The traits that make up the personality are significant contributors to the actions performed by the individual. It has been identified that self assertiveness, defiance, extraversion, narcissism and suspicion are some of the major traits associated with violence.^[2] In addition, violent behavior has also been characterized by traits such as hostility, egoism, self-centeredness, spitefulness, jealousy, and indifference to or lack of empathy for others. In a detailed understanding of criminal behavior, the role of psychopathic traits has also been emphasized in the past two decades.^[3]

Psychopathy is defined as a personality disorder centered around insensitivity and unemotionality.^[3] It is a form of antisocial behavior which becomes a part of the personality of an individual.^[4] The antisocial youth with psychopathic

traits have been found to be associated with a variety of conduct problems in forensic, mental health, and community living.^[5] The reasons for developing such tendencies could be frustrating events or situations with strong negative emotions which lead the adolescents to often feel stressed, anxious, and irritable on encountering adverse social situations.^[6] A psychological evaluation suggests that crime-prone youth are also impulsive, paranoid, aggressive, hostile, and quick to take action against perceived threats.^[7] These traits may be attributed to a sadistic personality which has a tendency to result in brutality, aggression, and demeaning behavior.^[8] Literature also suggests that children involved in conduct problems have been found to be associated with narcissistic personality traits characterized by an ostentatious sense of self-importance, a sense of superiority, and lack of empathy.^[9] Another personality trait which views a person to be focused on their own interests is Machiavellianism. It was found that individuals possessing this trait will manipulate, deceive, and exploit others to achieve their goals, thus, linked with juvenile delinquency.^[10] Therefore, psychopathy, narcissism, and

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Machiavellianism have been described as the “dark triad” of personality^[11] toward contributing to Juvenile Delinquency.

Juvenile Delinquency and its Contributing Factors

A “juvenile” is an individual who is above the minimum age of criminal responsibility (varies internationally), below the age of criminal maturity and is legally able to commit a criminal offense.^[12] In India, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, proposes “any person under the age of 18” to be considered a child^[13] and the age of criminal responsibility to be at 7 years.^[12] “Delinquent” is defined as a person who is found guilty,^[14] while delinquency is the act of being involved in behaviors which are in conflict with the law by a minor. Thus, the concept of juvenile delinquency can be stated as when a child or young person is at fault of some offense or antisocial behavior or the demeanor of child is beyond parental control.^[15] The word juvenile has been derived from the Latin word “juvenis,” which means young and the word delinquency has been originated from the word delinquent which means “to omit.”

Nowadays, youth are subject to individual risks as well as opportunities that could be beneficial and some potentially harmful. Quite often, youth take advantage of illegal opportunities by getting involved in various offenses, drug addiction, and violence.^[16] In the process of identifying the causes of criminal behavior, determining the factors contributing to the development and sustainment of delinquent identity becomes a priority as it is always constructed as an alternative to the conventional identity of the larger society.

The identity developed based on the personality characteristics of juvenile delinquents is reflected through the profiles of delinquent acts committed. These acts of delinquency may be a result of poor quality of life experienced by the individuals in terms of consistency of discipline, level of tension, and ease of communication. The factors contributing to the acts of delinquency by the juveniles may be classified into social factors, cultural factors, and physical factors.^[17] The intensity and severity of juvenile offenses are generally affected by the social, economic, and cultural conditions prevailing in a country.^[18] The negative consequences of socioeconomic instability may be the driving factors that increase the likelihood of involvement in delinquent activities by juveniles. In this context, the social factors contributing to juvenile delinquency may be the distorted family structure, poor educational background, lower social class, and influence of gangs and drug peddlers.^[12]

Further, the ongoing process of urbanization in developing countries with increased population density and degree of heterogeneity may have weakened the primary social relations, control, and cohesion that once existed in the society. These new patterns may influence the involvement of juveniles in criminal behavior.^[19] Furthermore, migration of people for a better livelihood is mostly associated with experience in

differences in norms, values, and culture embodied in varying degrees of acceptability. As a means to cope up with these challenges and working to improve the standard of living, the migrants might resort to criminal behavior. In addition, the role of media in popularizing the “cult of heroes,” which promotes justice through the physical elimination of enemies serves as an additional source of approval for indulgence in acts of delinquency.^[20] Furthermore, the social exclusion created by the growing gap between the rich and the poor potentially creates an identity crisis among the lower strata of the society. The symbolic exclusion of juveniles from the society for the offenses committed has important implications for the development of delinquent careers. Studies have also shown that the act of labeling an individual may lead to the self-adoption of a delinquent image, which later results in delinquent activity.^[21]

Another factor of significant importance is the influence of peers. Young people are especially vulnerable in their early years of teenage and subject to a great deal of peer pressure to conform to certain values, norms, and behaviors. Juvenile groups are characterized by hierarchical organization, high level of cohesiveness, and adoption of a behavioral code based on their experiences in the society. Affiliation to such groups may be an essential criterion for socialization. Therefore, it is a combination of factors like familial relationships combined with an association with delinquent peers that bid to be the highest predictor for delinquency.^[22]

Profiling of Juvenile Delinquents

In the present world, the changing process of social relations is challenging the traditional guiding patterns of relationship and transitions between family, school, and work. The lifestyle trajectories are becoming less predictable, thus, influencing the transition from childhood to adolescence, and then, adulthood resulting in an upsurge in the cases of juvenile delinquency^[12] that provokes an analysis of the underlying psyche of such offenders. Although literature deals with the judicial acts and provisions proposed to provide a healthy and growing environment for the children in conflict with law, the psychological evaluation of offenders may be an additional technique which is yet to be implemented.

Usually, the juvenile offenders who are arrested and prosecuted are profiled to understand the pattern and causes of crime. This is based on the understanding that the data will help in identifying offenders and prevention of crimes in the future. For the profiling, quantitative and qualitative measures are used. Quantitative techniques include questionnaires and checklists to identify the characteristics of juvenile offenders. Qualitative techniques include projective techniques which might be helpful in understanding and evaluating the unconscious processing of the individual. These measures may be an important facilitator of adjudication procedures for judicial decision makers and treatment planning by the medical fraternity.^[23-26]

Thus, on the above-mentioned relevance related to personality and juvenile delinquents, the present study aims to profile the personality of juvenile delinquents using Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projective technique, so as to develop a perspective on the relationships between the individual characteristics and pattern of crime committed by juvenile offenders.

Objective

The objective of this study was to analyze the personality of juvenile delinquents using TAT.

Method

A cross-sectional study was conducted with data collected from five male juvenile delinquents between the age group of 17 and 18 years selected through purposive sampling technique from juvenile homes in Delhi, India. The significance of collecting data from this particular age group could be based on the report published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). According to the (NCRB) report, stated that over the years there has been an increase in the rate of crimes committed by the juveniles in the age bracket of 16–18 years.

Inclusion Criteria

The following criteria were included in the study:

- a) Juveniles available in correctional homes.
- b) Correctional homes located in Delhi.
- c) Delinquents within the age of 17–18 years.
- d) Delinquents who could communicate in Hindi language.
- e) Delinquents with sound mental health.

Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were excluded from the study:

- a) Juvenile delinquents below the age of 17 years
- b) Delinquents with any physical disability.

Measures

The TAT is a projective technique intended to evaluate a person's patterns of thoughts, attitudes, observational capacity, and emotional responses to ambiguous stimuli. Murray and Morgan developed a series of picture cards to assess the personality of an individual.^[13] The pictures in the cards were developed on the basis of paintings, magazine illustrations, and photographs that suggested an important theme of personality. Each stimulus is characterized by "structure" and "ambiguity" while "structure" refers to the variations in lighting, color, time exposure, and central figure, "ambiguity" is measured by understanding what happens from a perceptual point of view by categorization to schema.^[14] The outcome was in the form of deduction of themes for TAT. The present study used a set of TAT stimuli consisting of a set of black and white cards that portray situations involving human figures in a variety of settings and situations. The subject is asked to construct a story around the situations shown in each card.

Based on the responses provided by the participants through stories, the thought pattern and emotions of the individual are identified and identified based on Bellack's analysis of TAT.

Procedure

The participants were presented with 10 TAT picture cards. The card numbers were 1, 2, 3BM, 4, 5, 6BM, 7BM, 8BM, 9BM, and 10BM. The subjects were asked to tell a story on each stimulus including the following elements: The event shown in the picture, what had led up to it, what the characters in the picture were feeling and thinking, and the outcome of the event. The stories narrated by them were noted down and analyzed using Bellack's method of the interpretation of TAT.

Bellack's analysis of TAT is a 10-step sequence concluding in an integrated summary of the dimensions of contemporary psychoanalytic diagnosis. The sequence of dimensions that form the analysis include the main theme of the story, main hero of the story, identification with the main hero, introduction of significant other, the main needs, significant conflicts, and the overall conception of the world. The next dimension inquires about the interpersonal object relations, identification of drive-defense constellations expressed in terms of specific conflicts and, finally, the integration of ego in terms of the outcome of the story (Abrama, 1993).^[27]

RESULTS

Analysis of TAT Protocols

The TAT protocols of the participants were qualitatively analysed, keeping their family background in consideration. The major theme emerged from the TAT protocol of juvenile delinquents is presented in Table 1 and the percentages of prominent theme emerged from the TAT protocol of juvenile delinquents is presented in Table 2. Case wise discussion of the emerging personality profiles based on the interpretation of TAT protocols is as under.

Case 1

The case is represented by a 17-year-old matriculate male, a domicile of Delhi, the only child belonging to a nuclear family having low socioeconomic status.

The delinquent is accused of acid attack in companionship of his partner. The stories narrated in the TAT protocol highlights the theme of betrayal and separation, introducing the hero to be resilient enough to overcome difficulties. The environment has been portrayed as uncongenial and threatening which has been strengthened by the prevalence of unfriendly figures causing hindrance to achievement of his goals. The stories also depict fear of rejection being reflected in the need for social acceptance and affiliation. The hero thrives to attain his goal, however, faces approach-avoidance conflict. His belief of superiority and tendency of blaming others makes him reshape the external reality and control the circumstances.

Table 1: The major themes emerged on each stimulus of TAT

SI. No.	TAT card number									
	1	2	3BM	4	5	6BM	7BM	8BM	9BM	10BM
Case 1	Guilt	Guilt	Guilt	Theft, violence	Theft, murder	Paranormal activity	Abduction, murder, revenge	Theft, murder	Dishonesty	Relationship issues; Betrayal; Murder; Guilt
Case 2	Violence in family	Isolation	Violence in family	Love; relationship issues	Paranormal activity; Isolation	Relationship issues; Separation	Relationship issues; family conflicts; responsibilities	Theft, murder	Violence; animal killing	Violence; abduction; separation
Case 3	Conflict with family; poverty; violence in family	Isolation; conflicts with family. Violence in family; achievement	Conflict with family; isolation; violence; theft; murder; killing for money; love; betrayal; conspiracy; blackmailing; revenge; death	Human trafficking; abduction; relationship issues; violence; murder; betrayal; love; betrayal; conspiracy; blackmailing; revenge; death	Paranormal activity; suspicion; death; separation	Separation; guilt; reunion	Separation anxiety; killing for money; murder; violence; separation	Murder; maiming; unnatural offense	Theft; dominance; violence; conspiracy; betrayal; death	Love; aggression; murder; rebirth
Case 4	Anxiety; isolation; deprivation; theft; loneliness; sadness	Theft; relationship issues; violence; poverty	Relationship issues; peer influence; separation; isolation; guilt	Greedy; domestic violence; relationship issues; separation; realization	Greedy; theft; guilt	Greedy; relationship issues; guilt; reunion	Loss in business	Organ trafficking; violence; guilt; realization	Theft; realization	Theft; substance abuse; violence in family; relationship issues; separation; realization; guilt; reunion
Case 5	Family bond	Family bond	Separation anxiety	Separation	Isolation	Family conflicts	Conflicts with family; frustration; sadness	Separation anxiety	Relationship issues; anger; dominance	Family conflicts; love for sibling

TAT: Thematic apperception test

Table 2: The percentage of the prominent themes emerged from data

Prominent theme	Percentage (%)
Relationship issues	90
Conflict with family	87
Anger and aggression	40.7
Theft	35.3
Murder	34.6
Loneliness	20
Separation	20
Greed	20

The superego is compromised to fulfill the needs. The stories corroborated the background of individual, commitment of heinous crime, and blaming others, thereby strengthening his need for social acceptance and escaping from punishment.

Case 2

The delinquent in the case is represented by a 17-year-old male of the 12th standard belonging to a nuclear family having three siblings, domicile of Bihar. The family type described by delinquent is indicative of a broken family. The father is the only breadwinner in the family. There is a harmonious relationship between the parents. The juvenile is very much attached to his mother and the elder sister. Furthermore, occasionally, the juvenile consumes alcohol.

The juvenile is accused of raping his younger sister. The main theme of the stories highlights loneliness and issues in relationships based on the belief that people fail to understand him. The delinquent is reported to have a lot of issues with his family members and similar has been highlighted in the stories by him. The stories in the TAT protocol represented the hero to be socially driven with an aim to attain material possession and economic mobility which may be attributed to the financial constraints faced in real life. The act performed shows revolt to the social norms that bound and pressurized him. The environment visualized by him is unfriendly; the pressure he feels by the social norms has made him believe that he has to lead life according to these norms. Additional characters have been introduced by the delinquent in context of conflict between them. This has emerged prominently in the protocol in terms of a child being beaten by parents, separation of siblings caused by abduction or death. The hero faces avoidance-avoidance conflict in every situation demanding compromises from him. However, the belief system of the hero allows him to make compromises in pursuit of achieving his goal. The hero uses passive behavior to deny the internal pain faced by him. On the whole, the hero is displayed to be overly bound by the moral standards forced on him, which in need for diffusion may have led to the behavior of the accused.

Case 3

The case is represented by a 17-year-old male of the eighth standard, from a nuclear family having two siblings from Delhi. The juvenile explained his involvement in criminal activities after the demise of his mother. He shares a harmonious relationship with his father and his siblings. The juvenile in the case is a repeat offender who was reported to be involved in thefts and physical assaults in custody too.

The main theme of the story reflects achievement, peer influence, and social recognition. The hero identified in the case is always in conflict with family members. Under peer influence, the hero commits crimes to achieve material possession to gain respect in the society. Peer pressure experienced by the juvenile causes him to perceive his environment to be exploiting. The hero projects figures as having passive aggression with family because parents of the hero do not approve of his company. The hero also unwillingly indulges in acts which are approved by the society and his parents. Moreover, the conflict faced by delinquent is that of avoidance-avoidance in terms of resolving internal conflict while deciding to distance him from external influences. To fulfill the goals, the superego of the juvenile gets compromised, and to avoid anxiety, he tries to regulate and manage the environment excessively. However, a lesson was learnt by the delinquent only on being punished for the intensity of crime committed. This realization motivated him to cut out from his earlier company and focus on ways of earning respect in the society.

Case 4

The case is represented by a 17-year-old male born in a nuclear family. The individual is reported to have lost his mother at the age of 3 after which he lives with his father, stepmother, and four siblings. He hails from a lower socioeconomic background, educated till class three, and a welder by profession based in Uttar Pradesh.

The individual is accused to have sodomized one of his male acquaintances. The main theme of the stories narrated in the TAT protocol revolves around loneliness, conflicting relationship with parents and moral standards. The hero in the stories is involved in antisocial activities driven by greed. This drive is attributed to an uncongenial environment characterized by the deprivation of materialistic possessions. The case further proceeds to highlight the heightened superego of the accused in terms of feeling guilty for the crime committed, leading to efforts invested toward resolving inner conflicts and restructuring the course of life. The figures introduced in the stories have been assigned stereotypical roles where the male is supposed to earn and fulfill the needs of the family. However, reflecting a part of the self, the male is described to be involved in antisocial activities, in which context, the female member is assigned the role of correcting and streamlining the male which is denied by

him, thus, portraying his dominating personality. This may be corroborated with the family background where the accused is reported to be missing his biological mother from whom he expected correction. While this role was fulfilled by the stepmother, he displays unacceptance based on the conflicting relationships, he shares with his parents. The hero is described to face approach-avoidance conflict at every step of life, out of which the choice usually made would be to satisfy the internal needs, irrespective of social acceptance. The main defense used for every act is that of rationalization which provides a self-approval for his actions. However, the stories end on a positive note where the hero is punished for the crime committed which teaches him a lesson for life.

The entire protocol may be understood as a projection of his own life which may be corroborated with the reports which explain him to have accepted involvement in the crime and displayed guilt for the same, which may be an indication of high moral standards which has emerged prominently in the TAT protocol.

Case 5

The case is represented by an 18-year-old male, student of class XII, belonging to a nuclear and harmonious family, domiciled in North-East India. Hailing from a lower socioeconomic background, the accused has one sibling and is a 1st time offender.

The delinquent is accused of murdering his mother and attempting to murder his father. In contrast, the entire protocol revolves around the main theme of the hero involving in conflict with parents for persuading him to take his own decisions, thus, leading to separation from them. The conception of an unfriendly environment has described the hero to be unhappy with a feeling of nostalgia prevailing throughout the protocol. The figures introduced in the narration are the parents who are symbolized to display passive aggression toward the hero. In this context, the significant conflict encountered by the hero is that of avoidance-avoidance. While on one hand, he was unable to convince his parents about his desires, on the other hand, he was unable to fulfill his own desires too. This conflict resulted in causing anxiety in the hero. Thus, he is forced to abide and act according to the wishes of the parents. The main defenses used by the hero are the excuses given to rationalize his recurrent failure in attempting to control the environment. The unresolved problems demanded compromises to be made unwillingly by the hero. Thus, with a restricted scope for integration of ego, the hero is reported to be passive in his actions.

The entire protocol may be comprehended as a story of his own life narrated to have happened before committing the crime. The crime could be a catharsis of the frustration built up through years of passivity and unsuccessful efforts made toward fulfillment of needs and desires.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of TAT protocols shows that three of five cases represent individuals from lower socioeconomic background (Case 1, 4, and 5), one case represents a broken family (Case 2), and another lacks a positive role model (Case 3). Shader^[28] identified poverty as a determinant of youth crime. In addition to economic status, literature also supports structural disadvantages in impoverished communities to be a major risk factor to youth criminality.^[29-30] Factors such as lack of recreational facilities, disorganized family, including family conflicts, and neglect of children are the important factors causing juvenile delinquency in India.^[31]

The major driving factors that emerged in the analysis of TAT protocols were need for social acceptance and association (Case 1), loneliness and issues in relationship, financial constraints, overly bound by moral standards (Case 2), peer influence (Case 3), and deprivation of material possession (Case 4). Ronad *et al.*^[32] have found that in the Indian context, lack of love and parental affection, gang subculture, poverty, association with deviant peers, peer pressure, and drug or alcohol use of child are identified to be a few major individual driving factors of juvenile delinquency. Frustration and maladjustment appear to be important causative factors of juvenile delinquency, with higher scores on regression and aggression. Moreover, on the basis of the findings of Yadav^[31] emotional instability, insecurity, feelings of inadequacy (both in respect of primary and secondary needs), and inferiority are common denominations in juvenile delinquency.

In three (Case 1, 3, and 4) of five cases, the delinquents express guilt after committing the offense, while there is no source of guilt in two cases (2 and 5). Ferdinand^[33] presented two categories of juvenile offenders: Neurotic offenders are those whose delinquency is the result of powerful unconscious impulses which often produces guilt which, in turn, motivates them to act out their delinquency in their community so that they will be caught and punished. To such delinquents, delinquency is a way of handling their internal problems by externalizing the problem within the environment. On the other hand, character disorder offenders feel very little guilty when they commit the acts of delinquency. They fail to develop self-control and do what they want to do, when they feel like doing it, due to a lack of positive identification models in their environment, and inability to sublimate their impulses in a socially acceptable manner. An adequate conscience structure or superego may not have been developed in such individuals. They come from disorganized families with uncongenial environment in their childhood. They are self-centered and feel to be aloof and have difficulty in forming meaningful relationships with others.

In summation, it is observed that the socioeconomic background of an individual followed by the perspectives

formed based on environmental and cultural influences plays a major role in determining the actions and behaviors of individuals.

CONCLUSION

The data generated from the analysis of TAT protocol suggest that most of the juvenile participants who were involved in criminal activities face relationship issues either with the family members or with the peers. The environment is perceived as unfriendly and hostile which led them to destroy the environment or let the environment inflict harm upon them. As a result, they seem to make an attempt to regulate the environment or become passive to the circumstances. The passive aggression built up in them leads them to indulge in criminal activities. Apart from this, most of the delinquents belong to the low socioeconomic strata of the society who look forward for social approval.

Implications

The increased rate of mental health problems among juvenile offenders suggested a clear need for interventions addressing the clinical and criminogenic needs of these individuals.^[27] In this regard, the current study is a personality profile of juvenile delinquents by the method of qualitative data analysis. The emphasis on “needs” and “presses” laid down by the TAT helped to understand the conflicts and emotions, reflecting the psychological causes for juvenile delinquency. The test can also be used as pre- and post-assessment measure to assess the impact of counseling and psychotherapy. Further, the study can also be replicated in schools and correctional homes to identify the psychopathic traits and suggest preventive measures to aid overall social and psychological development of the children.

Limitations

The present study will be restricted in generalizations of result due to small size of the sample. The sample in the present study was limited to male delinquents of Delhi only. The data from varied locations could add to the richness of the present study. Furthermore, the data collected only from male participants restrict the comparison of understanding the gender differences in the psychological needs and varied perspective of committing a crime.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study provides a scope for inclusion of wide range of sample with both males and females as participants from across the country which would provide increased assurance for generalizations of findings. In addition, techniques like Rorschach Inkblot Test could also be used to validate the data collected and findings based on the administration of TAT. Further, the critical incident technique can be used to supplement the prominent themes emerging from the data

collected through TAT. In addition, an evaluation of the effectiveness of mindfulness-based relaxation exercises would be a great contributor in streamlining the cognitive processes of the delinquents.

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