

## Reviews

### Understanding Psychology and Crime

by James McGuire

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#### *Reviewed by Claire Lawrence*

As a psychologist I am all too familiar with the representations of psychologists in sociological and criminological texts. Typically we are portrayed as being obsessed with categorising and pathologising individuals and their criminal activity, barely moving on from Lombrosian approaches to criminology. It is therefore refreshing and gratifying to read a text that addresses the role of psychology in the study of crime in a considered and accurate manner. McGuire takes on the unenviable task of representing psychology's extensive contribution to theory and practice relating to crime and criminal behaviour. This is no mean feat, and any author attempting such an undertaking could run the risk of covering too much material at the expense of close scrutiny and depth, or too little at the expense of offering the reader a text rife with crucial omissions. However, McGuire manages skilfully to navigate both the immense literature illustrating the role of psychology in the study of criminal behaviour and criminal justice, and the philosophical tradition of modern psychology, without sacrificing analysis or integrity.

In the opening chapter, McGuire deftly and accessibly addresses head-on the typical descriptions of psychological methods and ideas: positivism, individualism, biologism, determinism and reductionism. He neatly opens the debate regarding these concepts and comments on the misuse of the terms throughout much of social science. As a result, the reader is offered the opportunity to examine the contribution of psychology to the study of crime 'without prejudice'. However, this book is not a clarion call for those working in fields relating to crime to bow at the altar of psychology. Indeed, McGuire offers discussion of some aspects of psychology—for example, biological aspects of psychological theory—that, at times, I felt to be slightly over-critical. This is a minor point, however, and it contributes to the general 'even-handedness' apparent throughout the book. That said, later in the book, the reader is left in little doubt regarding both the author's opinion and the weight of empirical evidence presented, on the (in)effectiveness of imprisonment, tougher sentences and arrest in reducing recidivism.

The second chapter deals with standard approaches to criminological theories, ranging from societal and political approaches to the individual, with psychology discussed in terms of its relative contributions at each stage. The third chapter discusses psychological processes in criminal behaviour. Here, McGuire discusses relatively complex ideas such as affective and behavioural priming, and interactionism with ease and accessibility. The arguments are well presented and the concepts debated with clarity and focus. One slight quibble is that the models presented assumed cognitive primacy, thus ignoring any discussion of affective primacy. Chapter 4 gives a good overview of the theoretical approaches to antecedents for criminal behaviour, nicely termed 'pathways to offending'. Of particular note here is the chapter's useful structure in breaking material down into proximal and distal causes, and their relationships to theoretical approaches (eg rational choice and deprivation theories).

Although early in the book individual factors relating to criminal behaviour are treated with some degree of caution, in Chapter 5 these influences are dealt with accurately and clearly. The discussion of some relatively complex statistical procedures is well done and gives the reader the chance to engage fully in the debate regarding meta-analyses, effect sizes and causation. Chapters 6 and 7 turn towards methods to reduce criminal behaviour. Again, the material is dense and illuminating and one seldom sees such a comprehensively garnered mass of evidence. Indeed, McGuire comments on his own need to provide copious evidence from empirical studies throughout the book as a result of his psychological training, and of the subsequent drive always to provide evidence.

Finally, the book considers the role of psychology in the criminal justice system from a more philosophical and ethical position. This is an unusual and ultimately excellent tack. It discusses psychology's perceived problems (being an agent of state control, too little involved in challenging the status quo, and a 'slave to data'), and puts them into context (by helping to reduce recidivism, victimisation is reduced; psychology is involved in some key challenges to criminal justice anomalies and abuses; an empirical focus ensures that interventions are based on sound evidence rather than assumption).

I found this book to be one of the best I have read in a long time. It is packed with material and will be a treasure trove to anyone working within fields relating to criminal behaviour and the criminal justice system. Despite the density of material here, McGuire manages to remain accessible, articulate and entertaining throughout. I thoroughly recommend this book.

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