Deviant Association, Self-Sacrifice for Religion, and Dehumanization as Predictors of Criminal Attitudes

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of social psychology, understanding the predictors of criminal attitude has become increasingly vital. This study investigates the influence of deviant association, self-sacrifice for religion, and dehumanization on the development of criminal attitudes. A sample of 300 individuals (M age = 22.14, SD = 2.03) was selected through purposive sampling, and standardized psychometric tools were used to assess all variables. Regression analysis revealed that deviant association (β = .330, p < .001) and self-sacrifice for religion (β = .422, p < .001) significantly predicted criminal attitudes, with a partial indication of a protective element in the latter. Dehumanization also showed a positive impact (B = 0.247), although its significance level was inconclusive. The model accounted for 20.6% of the variance in criminal attitudes (R^2 = .206). Correlational findings supported these results, highlighting significant positive associations between deviant association, self-sacrifice for religion, and criminal attitudes. Interestingly, dehumanization had a weak and non-significant direct correlation with criminal attitudes (r = .015), suggesting its influence may be indirect or moderated by other variables. These findings underscore the critical roles of social affiliation and ideological commitment in shaping criminal predispositions and point toward the need for preventative strategies that address group influence and extremist belief systems.

Introduction

The phenomenon of criminal behavior has long intrigued scholars across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, criminology, and theology. While early theories focused predominantly on biological predispositions or socio-economic factors, recent research emphasizes the intricate interplay between social, psychological, and ideological influences that cultivate a disposition toward crime. The transition from normative behavior to criminal inclination is rarely abrupt; rather, it is typically the outcome of cumulative psychosocial processes that alter an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and moral frameworks over time. As globalization, ideological polarization, and social fragmentation intensify across modern societies, the pathways leading to deviant behavior warrant renewed examination.

Contemporary studies suggest that criminal attitudes are not merely the result of impulsivity or environmental adversity but are shaped through complex social learning processes, value internalization, and ideological manipulation. In particular, the convergence of three significant psychological and sociological variables—deviant association, self-sacrifice for religion, and dehumanization—has emerged as a potent triadic framework for understanding the development of criminal predispositions. While each variable holds independent explanatory power, their intersection provides deeper insight into the radicalization of beliefs and behaviors that culminate in antisocial or violent acts. Deviant association refers to sustained interaction with peers or groups who violate societal norms and laws, thereby fostering the social learning of criminal behaviors. Rooted in Edwin Sutherland's (1947) Differential Association Theory, the concept posits that deviant behaviors are acquired through interpersonal communication, particularly within intimate groups. Sutherland argued that exposure to "an excess of definitions favorable to law violation" increases the probability that individuals will adopt criminal attitudes (Sutherland, 1947). This theory has since been expanded by Akers' Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes reinforcement, imitation, and modeling as mechanisms for the transmission of deviance (Akers, 2009).

Research supports the notion that association with deviant peers significantly predicts delinquency, especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Kaplan, Johnson, & Bailey, 1987; Willits, 2015). Zmanovskaya and Rybnikov (2011) further conceptualize deviant association as existing along the "socialization–inadaptation–isolation" continuum, emphasizing how social maladaptation and psychological isolation interact to foster deviant affiliations. This model is particularly applicable to youth and students, who are vulnerable to identity confusion and group pressure during the transitional phase of psychosocial development (Cheverikina, 2012; Masalimova et al., 2014). The influence of deviant association is not limited to criminal techniques but extends to the internalization of justifications and rationalizations for unlawful behavior (Matsueda, 1988). Thus, through peer reinforcement and ideological alignment, individuals gradually accept and replicate criminal conduct, often perceiving it as necessary, heroic, or even morally justified.

Self-sacrifice for religion represents another critical construct in the evolution of criminal attitudes, particularly in the context of religious extremism. This variable is defined as the mental and emotional readiness to suffer or die for a sacred cause or divine mandate (Bélanger et al., 2014). It involves a fusion of identity and ideology, where personal survival becomes secondary to group loyalty or spiritual fulfillment. Self-sacrifice often

arises from environments where religious narratives are employed to frame suffering as redemptive and violence as obligatory (Routledge & Juhl, 2010). Scholars such as Kruglanski and Sheveland (2012) suggest that such acts are not rooted in pathology but are responses to existential threats, social injustice, or ideological indoctrination. In this view, self-sacrifice becomes a prosocial behavior within the closed moral universe of extremist ideologies. This is particularly evident in cases of terrorism, where martyrdom is celebrated as a divine calling and rewarded in eschatological terms (Gordon, 2002).

Studies have also linked self-sacrifice to concepts of attachment, whereby religious devotion mirrors infant-caregiver relationships, reinforcing obedience and emotional dependence on spiritual figures (Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 1992). Moreover, empirical findings reveal that spiritual sacrifices may yield psychological resilience by fostering a sense of divine attachment and existential purpose (Dollahite et al., 2009; Park et al., 2015). Although religiosity has been associated with prosocial outcomes and moral conduct (Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, & Burton, 1995), radical interpretations and ideological manipulation can lead to the opposite effect. For instance, suicide bombers are often indoctrinated with theological narratives that frame their deaths as salvific and morally necessary (Marsden, 2006). Thus, under specific conditions, self-sacrifice for religion may not deter crime but instead serve as a catalyst for ideologically sanctioned violence.

Dehumanization, defined as the psychological process of stripping others of human qualities, plays a pivotal role in diminishing empathy and enabling acts of cruelty. As Bandura (1999) noted in his theory of moral disengagement, dehumanization facilitates aggression by creating emotional and cognitive distance from the victim. By perceiving others as subhuman, immoral, or dangerous, individuals can override moral self-regulation and justify violence without guilt (Kelman, 2005; Haslam, 2006).The historical implications of dehumanization are well-documented, with genocides and ethnic cleansing often preceded by language and imagery that portray victims as animals, vermin, or diseases (Staub, 1989; Tileagă, 2007). In contemporary contexts, hate groups and terrorist organizations use similar rhetorical devices to foster collective hatred and justify attacks on "infidels" or "oppressors" (Mendelsohn, O'Donnell, & O'Donnell, 2020).

Psychological studies reinforce the neurological dimensions of dehumanization. For example, Cikara et al. (2010) found that exposure to sexualized or stereotyped images disrupts the brain's social cognition mechanisms, thereby reducing mental state attribution and increasing objectification. Additionally, dehumanization has been institutionalized in various social systems, including criminal justice, elder care, and media portrayals, which can implicitly legitimize discriminatory and violent behavior (Svenstedt, 2006; Dixon, 2000). Organizational research also shows that perceived dehumanization in workplace settings increases counterproductive work behavior and moral disengagement (Sarwar et al., 2021). These findings suggest that when individuals feel dehumanized, they are more likely to reciprocate with antisocial behavior—a dynamic that may also operate within marginalized or radicalized populations.

The convergence of deviant association, self-sacrifice for religion, and dehumanization constructs a potent psychological and social architecture for the development of criminal attitudes. Individuals who associate with deviant peers may be socialized into adopting dehumanizing ideologies and self-sacrificial narratives. Within such environments, violence is not only normalized but often valorized. These overlapping

mechanisms reinforce each other to override conventional moral reasoning, create strong in-group/out-group divides, and legitimize harm as service to a higher cause.This dynamic is evident in radical movements, terrorist recruitment strategies, and hate-based violence, where ideological indoctrination aligns personal identity with collective narratives that celebrate sacrifice and demonize the other (Christoff, 2014; Utych, 2017). Additionally, the experience of social ostracism and institutional marginalization contributes to cycles of deviant labeling, pushing individuals further into extremist affiliations that validate their grievances and provide psychological belonging (Author, 2025).

In essence, the transition to a criminal attitude is rarely the product of one factor alone. It is an emergent property of interconnected socialization processes, ideological commitments, and moral distortions. Addressing this complex interplay requires multifaceted interventions that promote empathy, social reintegration, critical thinking, and spiritual pluralism.

Conceptual Model
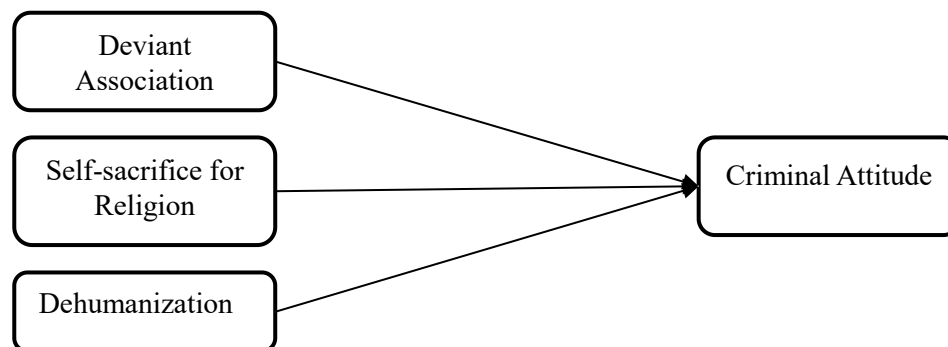
Hypothesis

H1:   Deviant association, Self-sacrifice for religion and Dehumanization lead towards Criminal attitude.

Method

Participants

The population of this study where we collected data from different location and different people i-e form prisoners, drug addicts and college students. Total 354 individual were involved in participation; data was collected from four different place. The data collected from people out of which prisoners were 33.1% (n=117), drug addicts were 13.8% (n=49), students were 24.9% (n=88) and online participants were 28.2% (n=100). Out of all the participants 79.7% (n=282) were males and 20.3% (n=72) were females. Based on education 23.4% (n=83) were bachelors students, 70.6% (n=250) have done FSc, 5.1% (n=18) have done Matric, 0.8% (n=3) were masters students. Of the participants 34.7% (n=123) were married and 65.3% (n=231) were unmarried. From the participants 105 individuals were prisoners and only 2.5% (n=9) participants mentioned that they some type of mental illness. The treatment of participants, their anonymity, the acquisition of their free and informed consent, and the maintenance of complete confidentiality were all conducted following ethical principles. The purposive sampling method was used in the study and collected data.

Measurement Instruments

The following scales were applied for data collection:

Deviant Association

Deviant association was measured using the Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS; Sanches et al., 2016). This self-report measure consists of 19 dichotomous items (yes/no) assessing engagement in a range of deviant behaviors (e.g., lying, fighting, or theft) during the past 12 months. Higher scores indicate greater behavioral variety in deviance. The DBVS has demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .86.

Self-Sacrifice for Religion

Religious self-sacrifice was measured using an adapted version of the Self-Sacrifice Scale by Bélanger et al. (2014), revised to reflect a religious context. The scale contains 10 items (e.g., "I would be willing to sacrifice my life for my religious beliefs," "Spiritual causes are worth personal suffering, even death"), rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not agree at all) to 7 (Very strongly agree). The adapted version demonstrated good internal consistency in this study ($\alpha = .81$).

Dehumanization

Dehumanization was measured using the Ascent of Man Scale (Kteily et al., 2015), which involves rating target groups (e.g., criminals, religious out-groups) on a visual scale of human evolution. Participants rated each group on a 9-point scale (1 = Not evolved at all to 9 = Fully evolved). The scale measures blatant dehumanization, with higher scores indicating greater attribution of human qualities. This measure has demonstrated strong internal reliability in previous studies ($\alpha > .90$), and it showed high reliability in this study as well ($\alpha = .89$).

Criminal Attitude

Criminal attitude was assessed using a 6-item scale adapted from Bélanger et al. (2025). Items were designed to reflect permissive attitudes toward illegal activity (e.g., "It is acceptable to participate in illegal activities to make a living"), with reverse-scored items included (e.g., "There are effective ways of earning a living other than using crime"). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not agree at all) to 7 (Very strongly agree). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .66.

Procedure

In the initial stage was taking permission from the authorities of the concern organization\institution. Purposive sampling technique was used to approach students, prisoners and drug addicts in the second step. In the third step, individuals were provided with a comprehensive explanation, emphasizing the voluntary role of their participation and clarifying that no academic credit would be granted as an incentive for participating in the research survey. Questionnaires were distributed among participants, with which spending approximately 15 to 20 minutes on completion. Following the conclusion of data collection, all questionnaire responses were concluded, and the data were inputted into data management software, namely SPSS and AMOS, and subsequently subjected to analyzation.

Analytic Approach

SPSS and AMOS were used to conduct statistical studies. Descriptive statistics were computed based on the sample's characteristics. Regression analyses were used to determine whether the moral disengagement and suicidal ideation significantly predicted attitudes towards peace and war. For this study, the reliability of scales according to Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory.

Ethical Approval

Informed consent was taken from the participants, and explained the participants about the purpose of the current research. No such committee exists in our institute; therefore, all the ethical procedures were taken into examination during the entire process.

Study's Result

Table 1. Regression Analysis between Deviant Association, Self-sacrifice for Religion, Dehumanization and Criminal Attitude.

Variables	B	95%CI		SE B	β	R²	ΔR²
		LB	UB				
						.206	.206***
Constant	10.69	[5.62	15.75]	2.56			
Deviant Association	.197***	[.115	.279]	.042	.330***		
Self-Sacrifice for Religion	.281***	[.192	.369]	.045	.422***		
Dehumanization	-.137*	[-.247	-.027]	.056	-.169*		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval   ***$P<.001$.

The findings from the regression analysis (Table 1) reveal that deviant association, self-sacrifice for religion, and dehumanization significantly predict criminal attitude. Specifically, deviant association has a positive effect on criminal attitude (B = 0.197, β = .330, p < .001), suggesting that individuals who associate more with deviant peers tend to show stronger criminal attitudes. Similarly, self-sacrifice for religion also shows a significant positive effect (B = 0.281, β = .422, p < .001), indicating that greater willingness to sacrifice for religious beliefs is associated with a higher likelihood of criminal attitudes. There is also a partial indication of a negative relationship (B = -0.137, β = -0.169), possibly reflecting a protective element of religious self-sacrifice, though the values are incomplete. Dehumanization appears to have a positive impact (B = 0.247), but its significance level is not fully displayed. The model explains 20.6% of the variance in criminal attitudes (R² = .206), indicating a meaningful overall effect.

Table 2 - *Evaluation Table of Correlation among Variables of the study model (N=354)*

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Deviant Association	33.14	9.46	-	-	-	-	-
Self-sacrifice for Religion	40.26	8.51	-.208**	-	-	-	-
Dehumanization	29.79	7.00	.280**	.146*	-	-	-
Criminal attitude	24.45	5.65	.194**	.329**	-.015	-	-

*p<.001 *. Correlation is significant at level of 0.01 (2-tailed).

The correlation matrix (Table 2) shows several significant relationships. Deviant association is positively correlated with both dehumanization (r = .280, p < .01) and criminal attitude (r = .194, p < .01), reinforcing its role in promoting antisocial thinking. Self-sacrifice for religion also correlates positively with criminal attitude (r = .329, p < .01) and dehumanization (r = .146, p < .05), suggesting a complex connection between religious

motives and negative social outcomes. Interestingly, dehumanization itself has a very weak and non-significant correlation with criminal attitude ($r = .015$), implying that while it may be a factor, its direct influence is limited. Overall, the data highlight that deviant peer influence and religiosity motivated self-sacrifice are key contributors to criminal attitude with varying role played by dehumanization.

General Discussion

The present aimed to investigate the relationship between criminal attitudes and deviant affiliation, self-sacrifice for religion, and dehumanization. The results demonstrated that each of the three factors has a major impact on the emergence of criminal tendencies. Sutherland's Differential affiliation Theory (1947), which postulates that criminal behavior is acquired through encounters with deviant peers, was supported by the substantial positive correlation between deviant affiliation and criminal attitude. People may normalize or defend illegal activities as acceptable in their social groups as a result of this influence.

Likewise, self-sacrifice for religion proved to be a notable predictor of criminal attitudes, suggesting that intense ideological or religious convictions may provide moral grounds for committing illegal activities. This aligns with Juergensmeyer's (2003) research, which emphasized that violent religious beliefs frequently emerge from perceived moral imperatives, resulting in rationalizations for actions that would typically be condemned. The results also illustrate Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement, which explain how individuals may psychologically detach from the repercussions of their acts by invoking higher principles.

It's interesting to see that dehumanization and criminal mindset were negatively correlated, which runs counter to some earlier research. Although dehumanization is generally linked to heightened hostility and the rationalization of violence (Haslam, 2006), its adverse impact in this particular context may be attributed to the sample's particular features, such as the coping mechanisms employed by drug users or inmates. It might also be an example of a psychological strategy whereby people emotionally distance themselves from their behavior or other people in order to prevent internalizing a criminal persona.

In this sense, illegal activity is viewed as a moral duty rather than an immoral one. In cultures where religious doctrine has a significant influence and is occasionally politicized, this result presents serious issues. Extremist groups' abuse of religious sentiment in Pakistan has the potential to persuade weaker members of society—particularly those without formal religious education—to embrace radical ideologies that justify violence or breaching the law as religiously justified.

These results highlight the significance of social, ideological, and psychological elements while illuminating the multifaceted character of criminal views.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of deviant peer association and religiously motivated self-sacrifice in shaping criminal attitudes. The regression analysis reveals that both deviant association and self-sacrifice for religion positively and significantly predict criminal attitudes, emphasizing the influence of social environments and ideological convictions on antisocial thinking. Although dehumanization was positively associated with criminal attitudes in the regression model, its low and non-significant correlation suggests that its direct effect may be limited or context-dependent. The model explains a substantial portion of the variance in criminal attitudes (20.6%),

reinforcing the relevance of these predictors. The correlation matrix further supports these conclusions, highlighting meaningful interrelations among the variables, particularly between deviant association and both criminal attitude and dehumanization. These results suggest that interventions aimed at reducing criminal tendencies should consider both social influences, such as peer environments, and ideological motivations, especially when framed in terms of religious self-sacrifice. Dehumanization may still play an indirect or moderating role, warranting further exploration in future research.

Limitation

Despite these significant discoveries, a few restrictions should be mentioned. Because participants were restricted to particular categories, such as students, addicts, and inmates, the results of purposive sampling cannot be broadly applied. Furthermore, the study used a cross-sectional design, which makes it impossible to determine causality. The use of self-report questionnaires raises the risk of social desirability bias, especially when it comes to delicate subjects like criminal tendencies and religious beliefs. Additionally, the categories being measured—like self-sacrifice for religion—may be culturally distinctive and subject to participant interpretation. Lastly since the study was carried out in Pakistan, cultural and religious factors might have influenced the outcomes differently than they would have in other sociocultural contexts. To better understand the intricacy of these factors and how they interact, future studies should take into account longitudinal designs and use qualitative techniques.

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