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OFFENDER-VICTIM DISTANCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CRIMINAL CONDUCT: TOWARDS A THEORY OF CRIMINOGENIC DISTANCING

ALEXANDRU FLORIN MĂGUREANU[1]

Abstract: *This article proposes the concept of criminogenic distancing, referring to the physical and psychological distance between offenders and victims that facilitates criminal conduct by reducing empathy, weakening moral restraints, and diminishing awareness of the consequences of harmful actions. Drawing upon criminological theory, victimology, and social psychology, particularly the work of Stanley Milgram and Albert Bandura, the paper argues that distancing operates as a general criminogenic mechanism across diverse forms of offending, including interpersonal violence, genocide, white-collar crime, terrorism and cybercrime. Physical separation, dehumanization, stereotyping, and the diffusion of responsibility are examined as complementary mechanisms that increase the likelihood of offending. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the theory for victimology, crime prevention, and public perceptions of offences involving diffuse or indirect victims.*

Keywords*: criminology; victimology; moral disengagement; dehumanization; empathy*

1. Introduction

The distance that exists between the offender and the victim plays an important role in the commission of criminal acts. We are referring not only to physical distance, but also to emotional distancing. The academic literature has extensively discussed the dehumanization of the victim. We consider this to be a fundamental process in the commission of crimes.

In many cases, especially when offenses are committed with particular cruelty or sadism, the general perception is that the perpetrator is a monstrous individual. While we do not entirely exclude the possibility that some offenders may indeed be monstrous, in most cases their behavior should instead be understood in relation to a dehumanized victim. Once the process of dehumanization is complete, the offender's capacity to feel compassion or pity for the victim ceases. This process can also be interpreted as a form of distancing.

[1] Associate Professor, PhD, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Police Academy, Romania, Address: Aleea Privighetorilor 1A, 014031 Bucharest, Romania, Corresponding author: magureanu_alexandru_1982@yahoo.com

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In other situations, where the victim is diffuse or not clearly identifiable, the offender—and often public opinion as well—fails to fully perceive the seriousness of the act and all of its consequences and ramifications. This is particularly evident in offenses such as economic and financial crimes or cybercrime.

Criminogenic distancing may be defined as the physical or emotional detachment between the offender and the victim that reduces empathic engagement, facilitates moral disengagement, and weakens the restraints against offending.

2. Physical Distancing from the Victim as a Criminogenic Factor

Stanley Milgram demonstrated through his experiments that obedience to authority is a highly significant factor in the commission of certain harmful acts. However, obedience tends to decrease when the victim's suffering becomes more apparent to the perpetrator (Milgram, 1974, p. 33). One of Milgram's subjects stated that he "did not want to see the consequences of what I had done" (Milgram, 1974, p. 34), while observers noted that "...subjects show reluctance to look at the victim."

Milgram further argued that an individual may be aware of a victim's suffering, but only in a conceptual sense. The pilot that drops a bomb "can reasonably suppose that his weapons will inflict suffering and death, yet his knowledge is divested of affect and does not arouse in him an emotional response to the suffering he causes" (Milgram S., 1974, p. 38). Moreover, Milgram hypothesized that it is more difficult to harm a victim when that victim is able to observe the offender's actions.

We consider Milgram's observation regarding aerial bombardment to be particularly important. Alongside its obvious benefits, technology also creates a form of distancing. As one author has observed (Traverso, 2003, p. 37), with its industrial methods of execution, Auschwitz, bore striking similarities to a factory. This resemblance was evident not only in its architecture, with its chimneys and warehouses arranged in symmetrical rows, but also in its location at the center of an industrial area and a major railway junction. "Production and extermination were indistinguishable, as if the massacre (in the gas chambers of Birkenau) were simply another form of production." Like any other factory, Auschwitz was characterized by a strict division of labor and a rational administration based on calculation, specialization, and the allocation of tasks (Traverso, 2003, pp. 40-41).

We argue that this genuine "industrialization of killing" paradoxically contributes to viewing genocide as a matter of numbers, causing the tragedy of each individual victim to fade from view. Similar mechanisms can be identified across various forms of criminal conduct and may be understood as reflecting a broader criminological principle: distancing from the victim facilitates the commission of harmful acts and contributes to what might be described as the "unreality of cruelty" (Măgureanu, 2025, p. 180). The ferocity and cruelty of certain acts may generate the false impression that such events could not have taken place, or that they are

beyond what is conceivable in ordinary human experience. Victims of mass atrocities are frequently perceived in quantitative terms, becoming numbers and impersonal statistics. As a result, empathic engagement with their suffering becomes considerably more difficult than in cases involving identifiable individual victims (Măgureanu, 2025, p. 180).

3. Emotional Distancing from the Victim as a Criminogenic Factor

Albert Bandura argued that individuals do not engage in harmful conduct without first providing themselves with a moral justification for their actions (Bandura, 2016, p. 49). He further identified several mechanisms of moral disengagement that facilitate such conduct. These include euphemistic language, whereby harmful acts are described in sanitized or less offensive terms (Bandura, 2016, p. 53); advantageous comparison, through which "self-exoneration by advantageous comparison with more flagrant inhumanities is a third mechanism for cloaking behavior in an aura of benevolence" (Bandura, 2016, pp. 58-62); displacement of responsibility, particularly by obscuring or minimizing one's agentive role in causing harm; and diffusion of responsibility, whereby "any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others." (Bandura, 2016, p. 62).

Such mechanisms are particularly evident in the context of collective crimes, such as genocide and hate-motivated offences. Pre-existing prejudices against victims lead to their categorization into rigid stereotypes. These forms of labelling differ from ordinary processes of generalization, as they obscure the individual differences among members of the targeted group. Furthermore, once such stereotypes have been internalized, no argument or evidence is sufficient to alter the offender's perception of a victim belonging to a stigmatized group (Levin, & McDevitt, 1993, p. 22). Because they stem from prejudice, such stereotypes are almost invariably irrational. These forms of stereotyping and prejudice facilitate psychological distancing from the victim, making it easier for offenders to perceive members of the targeted group as less deserving of empathy and moral consideration.

Social reaction, that is, the way society perceives and evaluates criminal conduct, may itself contribute to the offender's psychological distancing from the offence. Although it would be somewhat inaccurate to argue that society creates crime solely through the legal norms it establishes, both ante factum and post factum social reactions significantly influence perceptions of particular categories of offences. For example, economic and financial crimes generally do not provoke the same degree of public condemnation as violent offences such as rape, homicide, or robbery. The social stigma attached to these offences is considerably weaker. Indeed, many white-collar offenders have even been portrayed as heroes who successfully challenge the system, outsmart the seemingly impregnable machinery of the modern state, and exploit loopholes and shortcuts within the complex mechanisms of financial success (Măgureanu, 2025, p. 123). These social representations can increase the emotional distancing between the perpetrator and the crime he commits. Moreover, the criminal justice system often exhibits a comparatively restrained response to economic crime.

This is due, on the one hand, to the complexity of such offences, the difficulties associated with gathering evidence, the considerable resources available to offenders, and, in many cases, their specialized expertise. On the other hand, prosecution is further complicated by the potential collateral consequences that may result from the downfall of a business enterprise. Even where criminal conduct clearly warrants judicial intervention, the justice system may face significant pressure because of the broader economic implications of prosecution. The conviction of the responsible individual may, in some cases, inflict substantial harm on the company in which the offender is employed or through which the offence was committed, as well as on related businesses or even the national economy (Măgureanu, 2025, p. 124).

Most studies indicate that violent offences are committed more frequently against persons known to the offender. In many cases, offences committed against family members or other individuals with whom the offender has a close relationship are characterized by extreme cruelty or even sadism. If this is the case, it likely indicates that a considerable degree of emotional distancing has already occurred between the offender and the victim. The victim is no longer perceived as a loved one—or, indeed, no longer perceived as a person at all, having been dehumanized—but rather as an obstacle or an object, whose removal appears justified or necessary. As noted in the literature, homicides involving family members or acquaintances may appear to be crimes of passion. However, they exhibit recognizable patterns and occur with a certain degree of regularity, most frequently taking place in domestic settings, during weekends, and in the presence of other people (Gottfredson, & Hirschi, 1990, p. 32). We agree, as the above-mentioned author also argues, that even in the case of crimes of passion, which are largely driven by impulsivity, there remains an underlying process—a mechanism through which the individual proceeds to the commission of the offence.

The offender's psychological distancing from the victim is even more evident in certain categories of offences, particularly terrorism. A distinctive feature is that the mechanism through which the offender proceeds to the commission of the act is more readily facilitated in the case of terrorists, particularly regarding the process of self-legitimation. Cognitive dissonance can be overcome much more easily when offenders believe that they are pursuing a noble cause, acting in the service of a greater good, and confronting what they perceive as absolute evil. Terrorists typically associate their actions with objectives they regard as morally justified, a tendency reflected in the names adopted by terrorist groups, which almost invariably invoke notions such as revolution, liberation, holy war, or similar ideals (Măgureanu, 2025, p. 165). It is widely accepted in the scholarly literature that the primary victim is of little significance to the terrorist. Rather, the principal objective is the dissemination of fear and terror among a broader audience. The processes of radicalization and the pursuit of objectives that the terrorist regards as overriding all other considerations make psychological distancing from the victim considerably easier. As a result, the individual victim is no longer perceived as a person in his or her own right, but merely as a means of achieving broader ideological or political goals.

4. Implications of the Principle of Victim Distancing

Further research and the continued development of this theory may have important implications for both victimological studies and crime prevention. For example, educational programs in secondary schools presenting the consequences of sexual offences, including their long-term impact on victims, could have a significant preventive effect by reducing the psychological distance between potential offenders and their victims. Likewise, further theoretical and empirical research may contribute, even if only modestly, to improving public perceptions of offences such as white-collar crime by reinforcing the understanding that there are no victimless crimes.

Hans von Hentig, who was the first to employ the concept of the "criminal duet," argued that, leaving aside offences directed against fictitious victims (such as the state, public order, or public health), every crime necessarily involves two partners: the offender and the victim (von Hentig, 1967, p. 383). We argue that even in situations where the offender's motivation appears to be abstract—whether religious, political, or ideological—or where the offence is committed against a legal entity or the state, there is always a victim, that is, a passive subject of the offence. In such cases, however, the victim is diffuse and psychologically distant. It is precisely this form of distancing that facilitates the commission of certain offences and influences public perceptions, resulting in less moral condemnation than in cases involving interpersonal violence, where the victim's suffering is immediate, visible, and readily identifiable.

5. Conclusions

The theory of criminogenic distancing cannot provide answers to every question—indeed, no criminological theory can. Nevertheless, we believe that it offers a useful framework for understanding, explaining, and, potentially, preventing certain forms of criminal conduct. The extraordinary cruelty and sadism that characterize some offences may often be explained not so much by the exceptional or monstrous nature of the offender, but rather by a psychological process through which the victim becomes increasingly distant, dehumanized, and deprived of moral significance. In some cases, criminal distancing is more readily achieved because of the particular characteristics of the offence itself and the nature of the social reaction it evokes. This is especially evident in offences committed "at a distance," such as cybercrime and economic or financial crime, where victims are often diffuse, anonymous, or psychologically remote. Consequently, offenders are less likely to perceive the human impact of their actions, thereby facilitating the commission of the offence. As a general principle, the commission of a criminal act becomes more difficult when the offender is confronted with the victim's suffering and fully appreciates its human consequences. The closer the victim is to the offender—physically, emotionally, or psychologically—the more

difficult it becomes for the offender to engage in the processes of moral self-justification and psychological distancing that facilitate criminal conduct.

In our view, one of the principal strengths of the proposed theory is that it does not seek to challenge or replace existing criminological theories. Rather, it aims to integrate, at least in part, several concepts that are already well established in literature within a broader explanatory framework. Criminogenic distancing should be understood as the outcome of a psychological and social process that may be facilitated by a variety of factors, including dehumanization, victim anonymity, stereotyping and labelling, offender radicalization, and other mechanisms that reduce empathic engagement with the victim. By bringing these mechanisms together under a single theoretical construct, the theory seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that facilitate criminal conduct across different categories of crime.

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