COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE
How Offenders Experience the World and What We Can Do About It

JACK BUSH, DARYL M. HARRIS, AND RICHARD J. PARKER

WILEY Blackwell
Cognitive Self Change
Cognitive Self Change
How Offenders Experience the World and What We Can Do About It

Jack Bush, Daryl M. Harris, and Richard J. Parker

WILEY Blackwell
To our children

Deborah and Kalita;
Julia, Angie, Joanna, and Johnny;
Owain and Aneurin

And in memory of Don Andrews
Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgements xi

Introduction 1
Understanding Offending Behavior 1
Hard-Core 5
Cognitive Self Change 9
A Human Connection 12
Phenomenology and Self-reports: Some Preliminary Comments about Method 14
Summary of Chapters 16

1 The Idea of Criminal Thinking 25
Ellis, Beck, and Antisocial Schemas 33
Psychopathology or Irresponsibility 39
An Alternative Point of View 44

2 Offenders Speak their Minds 48
Seven Male Offenders 49
Three Young Women 58
Three Violent Mental Health Patients 62
Two Problematic Groups 64
Three British Gang Members 72
Conclusions and Interpretations 75
# Contents

3 Cognitive–Emotional–Motivational Structure 78
   The Idea of Conscious Agency: A Likely Story 79
   Will and Volition, Self and Self-interest 82
   The Model 85
   Basic Outlaw Logic: Learning the Rewards of Criminal Thinking 89
   Variations of Criminal Thinking 92
   Conclusions and Implications 94

4 Supportive Authority and the Strategy of Choices 97
   The Problem of Engagement 97
   Conditions of Communication and Engagement 99
   Supportive Authority 102
   Rethinking Correctional Treatment 109
   The Strategy of Choices 109
   Final Comments 115

5 Cognitive Self Change 118
   Four Basic Steps 121
   Collaboration and the Strategy of Choices 139
   Brief Notes on Program Delivery: Group Size, Duration and Intensity, Facilitator Qualifications and Training 141

6 Extended Applications of Supportive Authority 145
   Why Offenders Need Help 145
   Not Either/Or: Some Promising Examples 146
   The System as the Intervention: Some Recent Examples 152
   Supportive Authority, Revisited 157
   An Idealistic Proposal (with modest expectations) 159

7 How We Know: Some Observations about Evidence 162
   Introduction 162
   Cognitive Self Change 164
   The Significance of Subjectivity 165
   Science and Subjectivity 169

Bibliography 175
Index 183
The authors came together to write this book from diverse and distant places. Jack Bush (PhD in philosophy) from Tacoma, Washington, USA, entered the field of correctional treatment in 1973 – before widespread acceptance of evidence-based practice, and before the term “what works” was part of professional parlance. Bush’s education in correctional treatment consisted largely of listening to offenders and ex-offenders tell their stories of how they perceived the world. Daryl Harris (doctorates in both clinical psychology and neuropsychology) has pursued a practical career in forensic psychology in Great Britain from his home in Wales. Richard Parker (PhD in criminology) has developed and delivered treatment programs for offenders in Canberra and Sydney, Australia. In a sense and to varying degrees, we all grew up professionally in the blossoming era of evidence-based practice. And each of us experienced frustration in our encounters with the culture of actual forensic practice.

With a background of counseling voluntary and semi-voluntary clients, Parker felt some contradictions in the “what works” literature. How do you individualize treatment while maintaining program integrity? How do you keep relatively unmotivated high-risk offenders involved in community treatment programs geared more to motivated medium-risk offenders? Parker saw even the most motivated offenders trying hard, but ending up confused and overwhelmed by the large number of skills they were asked to learn.

Harris recalls a warning from the head of security at his first clinical psychology post at a high security hospital in the UK. Do not turn your back on “them” for a second, the security official counseled, or they will assault you – and that will be the end of “your war.” The comparison of
offender treatment with combat, with treatment providers expected to be on their guard and offenders feeling under siege, is abhorrent to the authors and, we believe, clinically futile.

We were frustrated with the adversarial stance of “us versus them” and the conception of corrections, including correctional treatment, as a kind of war. We found the delivery of treatment within that culture to be a battle within the criminal justice system – a battle of the system fighting against itself. We were equally uncomfortable with the clinical notion of criminality as a kind of disease. And we were frustrated (as we believe all practitioners of correctional treatment sometimes are) with the barrier to communication posed by offenders themselves by their attitudes of hostility and non-compliance to authority. And yet, if it is indeed a war between prison authority and offenders, who can blame offenders for vowing not to lose?

Our common backgrounds, diverse as they are, united us behind the major themes of this book. Our understanding of offenders as human beings derives less from statistical outcome studies and more from our personal communication with individual offenders and ex-offenders. Yet we acknowledge and respect the quantitative evidence of what works in this field.

We have each been strongly influenced by the “what works” literature originated by Canadian researchers, and particularly by Don Andrews. Bush first met Don Andrews on a cocktail cruise on board a boat on Lake Huron in 1988. The cruise was sponsored by a Canadian correctional treatment conference. Andrews was spreading the word about the analyses of correctional treatment outcomes being performed by him and other Canadian researchers. Bush was implementing the Cognitive Self Change program for violent offenders in the American state of Vermont. Cocktails in hand, Bush explained to Andrews why, based on his experience with offenders, it was important to pay attention to the most criminal of offenders (not the “easy cases”), to pay particular attention to how they think, and to communicate with them in ways that do not lead them to reject our message – and us. Andrews explained to Bush the statistical foundations of risk, need, and responsivity. It was a moment of mutual recognition. We were describing the same phenomena from two different points of view, and coming to the same conclusions.

That moment of recognition captures the intent and structure of this book. The authors do not offer an alternative to quantitative science as a way to understand criminal behavior and what to do about it. Rather, we present an additional dimension to that understanding. This is the dimension of human experience, of offenders’ experience and our own. We believe this aspect of our shared humanity provides a potential key to diminishing the war between us and them, and in some cases to resolving it.
We want to thank all those that helped this book come about.

Jack says: I want to thank those who have supported my ideas and my programs over the past many years. In particular, I thank my long time friend and boss at the Correctional Treatment Program in Oregon, Roger Smith; my friends and colleagues in Vermont who nurtured and delivered and improved the Cognitive Self Change program, and especially Brian Bilodeau, Thomas Powell, Charles Gurney, Steve Woodsum, Renee Weeks, and Richard Powell. Above all, I thank my best friend and lover, wife, life companion, and writing coach: Susan F. Brink. Thank you, Susie.

Richard says: I would like to thank the former Executive Director of ACT Corrective Services, James Ryan, for showing faith and having the courage to bring the Cognitive Self Change program to Australia; and the numerous CSC facilitators who have vindicated my faith in the ability of this program to reach out to a wide array of often difficult offenders; and my wife, Marlene, who has been with me through this incredible journey.

Daryl says: I would like to say thanks to anyone who has shown faith in me or taken the time wittingly or unwittingly to help me learn – principally my parents (Pat and Alan), brother (Richard), friends, colleagues, offenders, patients, teachers (especially Chris Penford, Richard Harvey, and Dave Golder), lecturers (especially Janice Kay, Denver Daniels, and Sean Hammond), and my co-authors, but most of all Sarah my wife and my children Owain and Aneurin.
Introduction

In this introduction the authors offer a brief description of their premises and presuppositions, particularly as these differ from traditional or “mainstream” ways of thinking in the field of correctional treatment. We sketch and briefly summarize how our experience with offenders points us to the main conclusions of this book. This Introduction is presented in six sections.

Understanding Offending Behavior

On the face of it, criminal behavior appears easy to understand. Selfish disregard for other people seems to be a normal human trait. It is easy to imagine that most of us would be this way most of the time if we were not so well brought up, or if there were no laws, or if laws were not enforced. However, on a closer look, criminal behavior is not so simple. The most persistent offenders seem to be immune to caring about the harm they do to others. Law enforcement and punishment seem not to deter them. They seem perversely determined to be as they are, and to stay that way. Something more than “normal human selfishness” is going on here. But what is it?

As moral human beings we judge criminal behavior (or at least most of it) to be morally wrong, and we treat it accordingly. From this point of view, we oppose crime and to try to make criminals change, but we do not try
to cure them. We teach and preach morality and we punish. Those offenders who do not respond to our moral influence (and this includes the worst of them) are relegated to more profound depths of immorality. Moral judgments tend to be terminal judgments: when we judge that something is evil we know all we need to know in order to know that we must oppose it, and that, we tend to think, is that. Evil, at least to some familiar ways of thinking, is its own explanation.

On the other hand, it is easy to think that persistent offenders, or at least the worst of them, must be sick. Without being technical about it, it is natural to think that these people are so different from the rest of us – are so far from being normal – that there must be something wrong with them. Psychologists provide the technical language; they posit various forms of pathology – an underlying disorder of one kind or another – that accounts for the differences between persistent offenders and the rest of us. The most intractable offenders are assigned the deepest levels of pathology. “Antisocial personality disorder” denotes a misshapen personality. “Psychopathy” implies something deeper and more sinister.

Competition between these two points of view – the moral and the clinical – defines a fundamental dilemma facing contemporary corrections. Are offenders simply bad or are they sick? Do they deserve punishment or treatment? Society divides itself by its answers to these questions. We choose sides and we marshal our arguments, but we never lay the argument to rest. The argument has become political and, as with many other political arguments, the opposing positions rest on such fundamental principles – on such fundamentally different ways of thinking – that no basis is found for agreement.

This book looks at offenders from a different point of view. Our understanding of offending behavior – and what to do about it – is based on how offenders experience themselves, the world around them, and the authority of the law. We ask offenders to explain how they think and feel about the various circumstances of their lives. We listen to their unstructured and unguarded expressions of the ways they experience circumstances and events. We teach offenders how to be objective observers of their own subjective experience and to tell us what they observe. In all of this, we look and listen for how offenders think and feel, and how they see the world around them.

The concepts of consciousness (subjective experience) and agency (will, volition) are fundamental to the conceptual framework of this book. This marks a departure from the experimental methods and the theoretical perspectives of mainstream psychology. We believe it is a departure worth making.
The private, subjective experience of individual offenders is our key to understanding their behavior. It is not the only key, and it is not the only way to understand offending behavior, but by looking at the world through offenders’ eyes we see old questions in a new light: why do offenders offend? Why are they so resistant to change? Why do they not cooperate with treatment? Why do they resent and oppose authority? Why do they treat people around them as objects to manipulate, rather than as people? All of these characteristics of offenders – so problematic to those of us who deal with them (as therapists or any other way) – make perfectly good sense to the offenders who employ them. In this limited but important sense, we can understand their behavior. We see the sense their behavior makes to them.

The ways offenders see the world presents clues as to what we can do about it. By attending to how offenders perceive those of us who make it our business to interfere in their lives, we can learn to present ourselves in ways that achieve better communication and collaboration. We can learn how to enforce the law – or the rules of supervision, or the conditions of treatment – without automatically triggering their resentment and defiance. Most importantly, we can learn how offenders’ ways of seeing the world must change in order for them to stop being offenders. And, finally, we learn important lessons about how we can make that happen.

To do this – in order to be able to do this – we step aside from moral and clinical presuppositions. We focus on individual offenders. We note the patterns of thinking and feeling – the beliefs, attitudes, and personal life-rules – that shape each offender’s way of seeing the world and him- or herself as a participant in that world. We note the particular thoughts and feelings an offender has at the times that he or she offends. And we discover, practically without fail, an explicit and meaningful connection between each offender’s way of experiencing his or her situation and that person’s acts of offending behavior:

Every criminal act makes some kind of sense – is permissible, justified, or even necessary – in the mind of the person who does it at the time that he or she does it.

The most intractable – the most criminal – offenders experience the world in ways that make it practically inevitable that they will offend. Their beliefs, attitudes, and habits of thinking shape the meaning of the situations they encounter, their sense of identity as persons, and the motives for their behavior. Offenders’ beliefs and attitudes are not simply ideas or opinions that happen to occupy their minds: offenders hold to their beliefs
Cognitive Self Change

and attitudes with willful determination. Everything that matters most to them is at stake in how they see the world, and their way of seeing the world embraces offending behavior as a natural and desirable way to act. Their willful attachment to these ways of thinking lies at the root of their offending behavior, and at the heart of our difficulty in getting them to change it.

Examining the way offenders experience their own behavior casts a new light on some old questions. Do forces beyond offenders’ control cause them to offend, or are their offending actions the result of their own willful choice? Can offenders act differently than they do, or do forces of which they are not even aware determine their offending behavior? Does offending behavior need to be controlled by force, or can treatment lead offenders to control themselves? This book challenges the old dichotomies of pathology versus morality, behavioral determinism versus moral responsibility, and punishment versus treatment.

- In a very real sense offenders are unable not to offend, because the choice to offend is made even before they act, by the habits of thinking they perform automatically, without thinking. Their habits of thinking “predetermine” that they will offend. But they hold to their ways of thinking by their own acts of willful determination, and so, in principle and to at least some degree, their thinking and the behavior that results from it are within the scope of their volition and control.

Offenders’ ways of experiencing our attempts to make them change point to several recommendations for effective intervention.

- The cognitive, emotional, and volitional habits of mind that lead offenders to offend also lead them to resist others’ attempts to make them change. This, we suggest, lies at the heart of the problem of correctional change. The problem takes the form of a paradox: offenders must change in order to be receptive to change.
- The problem of motivating offenders to change is one and the same with the problem of offending behavior itself. Each offender is motivated to perform his or her own pattern of offending. Offenders are not motivated to change, they are motivated to offend: that is precisely the problem.
- It is helpful to think of correctional treatment not as a cure for a disease or as a remedy for cognitive, emotional, or behavioral “deficits,” but as providing offenders a way out of a trap of their own making, a trap they create for themselves by their own habits of thinking.
• Offenders tend to perceive the authority of the law as a threat to their autonomy and identity as a person. Given the way they experience and define themselves, and given the way authority is often presented and enforced, this is not a distortion. In these terms, they are right.

• Law enforcement can be rendered credible and legitimate to offenders when it is combined with the opportunity – and a genuine invitation – to live within the law, and is conveyed with respect for every offender’s essential human freedom to decide for him- or herself whether or not to take that opportunity and submit to the authority of the law. The authors term this combination of messages “Supportive Authority.”

• It is an appropriate function of correctional treatment to make participation in society a realistic and achievable option for individual offenders.

• Law enforcement and correctional treatment are not incompatible, but complementary. The effectiveness of each depends on the effectiveness of the other.

• Effective intervention in offending behavior is best accomplished not by treatment or law enforcement applied separately or alone, but by a comprehensive and integrated system of criminal justice that embraces both.

Hard-Core

We use the term “hard-core” to designate the most criminal of repeat offenders. It is a deliberately nontechnical term. It includes many offenders who meet the criteria for being labeled psychopaths, but it is not restricted to them. It includes some members of prison inmate social cultures that pride themselves on being “stand-up convicts,” and who, in their own minds, do not reject morality but live by a strict moral code of their own creation. It includes some members of street gangs whose loyalty and commitment to each other provides the central meaning to their lives and the strongest motive for their offending behavior. It includes some lone offenders whose devotion to crime is the overriding value and principle of their life. It includes some stereotypical psychopaths who have no feelings for anybody, and for whom most other offenders, including most of the offenders we term hard-core, have no respect or trust at all.

Hard-core offenders present the internal roots of their criminality – the attitudes, beliefs, and habits of thinking that lead them to offend – in particularly clear and unadulterated forms. They are an important source of our understanding of offenders’ ways of thinking, and a primary target for change in treatment.
There are important distinctions to be made within the range of offenders we term hard-core. They differ in clinical diagnoses, assessment of risk, their social loyalties, the degrees of harm they do to others, the causes and sources of their antisocial attitudes, and in the extent of their personal responsibility for holding to those attitudes. These distinctions are useful and important, but we believe that it is even more important to consider what these offenders have in common. Their explanations, descriptions, and self-reports of how they experience the world lead us to conclude that it is not merely the content of their beliefs and attitudes that give rise to their persistent offending behavior; it is the extent of their willful attachment to these beliefs and attitudes that renders them so persistently criminal and so intractable to change. Hard-core offenders do not all think the same (though there are many similarities), but we suggest that they are all the same in this: they are all willfully attached and committed to ways of thinking – to ways of interpreting and experiencing their life situations – that, to their minds, renders their criminal behavior as the most natural and most desirable way to act.

We go further: willful attachment to criminogenic attitudes lies at the heart of offending behavior generally, not just for those offenders that we deem “hard-core.”

Offenders display different degrees of willful attachment to their criminogenic ways of thinking. Many young, low-risk offenders try on and try out pro-criminal attitudes when they experiment with offending behavior. Their dominant attitudes remain pro-social. With low-risk offenders, the best intervention may be no intervention at all: left to themselves most of them find their own way out of it (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Farrington et al., 2006). Most offenders, including many repeat offenders, have pro-social attitudes and sentiments alongside their antisocial attitudes and sentiments – a situation that makes treatment strategies such as Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) and Good Lives (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007) effective tools for treatment for some offenders. Most “less-than-hard-core” offenders have interests and hold to values that are at odds with their pro-criminal attitudes and values, and it is sometimes possible in treatment to exploit this difference – a difference that offenders can sometimes be led to experience as “disparity” or “dissonance” (Cooper, 2007) within their own motives and values – as internal motivation to change.

Still, the criminal behavior of less-than-hard-core offenders arises from their willful attachment to pro-criminal attitudes, however less than wholehearted that commitment may be, and however mitigated by their attachment to competing, pro-social attitudes.
The subjective roots of offending behavior are emotional and volitional as well as cognitive. The extent to which offenders are willfully attached and committed to pro-criminal attitudes is the extent to which they resist our attempts to change those attitudes.

Offenders tend to experience punishment as victimization, and the more committed they are to antisocial attitudes, the more victimized they feel themselves to be. The use of punishment, and the threat of punishment, to make offenders change their antisocial behavior can, and often does, have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the antisocial attitudes that produce that behavior.

Many offenders tend to experience treatment either as an unwelcome and unjustified intrusion in their lives, or as an opportunity to evade punishment for their behavior. When offenders experience disparity and conflict between their pro-social and antisocial attitudes, this does not guarantee that they will opt for the pro-social ones, and they typically do not. When their thinking is shown to be distorted or irrational, there is no guarantee that they will acknowledge that fact or, if they do, that they will care. Offenders’ willful attachment to their own attitudes puts them in a position whereby they are immune to whatever we say or do to them. As a last resort (or in many cases a first resort), offenders can insulate themselves from the influence of treatment by the simple expedient of closing their ears to it.

How offenders respond to our interventions is within their control, not ours. The authors see this as the core problem of correctional change. In our view, almost all treatment used with offenders fails to engage the heart of the problem.

Treatment that requires offenders to have “motivation to change,” to “be ready to change,” to be able to experience “dissonance” or ”disparity” in their values and attitudes, to be able to recognize that a pro-social life “really meets their needs” (or “meets their real needs”) better than a life of crime, to be able and willing to recognize the “irrationality” or “cognitive distortions” in their thinking, and to care about all of that, requires criminals to let go of their pro-criminal attitudes in order to benefit from treatment for being criminal. This is not to say that these therapy strategies do not work. They do work, but only with a limited range of offenders and under limited conditions. The beliefs and attitudes of hard-core offenders are not merely ideas; they are declarations. Offenders take a stand. They make themselves immune to change by their determination to be as they are, and to act as they do. When offenders’ willful attachment to their criminogenic attitudes is not addressed directly, treatment misses the heart of the problem, and hard-core criminals, by definition, are excluded.