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# A Criminological Interpretation of Kip Kinkel

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Techniques of neutralization refer to psychological strategies that criminals use to justify their actions. Kip Kinkel utilized denial of responsibility to justify his spree murders of his parents and his high school classmates. When apprehended by the police and interrogated, Kinkel stated that he committed these crimes because “he had to.” He rationalized his decisions by stating that he knew his parents were embarrassed of him after he was suspended and even expelled from high school; because he loved his parents, he felt like the only recourse that he had was to take their lives. Kinkel also stated that he was hearing voices in his head, perhaps as an initial attempt at exhibiting schizophrenic behavior so that he could make an insanity defense in court, though he ultimately reneged these claims (Swanson, 2000).

Hirschi’s social bonding theory argues that a lack of social bonds will heighten an individual’s propensity for committing crime, as one will believe that one has nothing to lose. I believe this theory to be the strongest of the social process theories in explaining Kinkel’s behavior (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018). Despite having some friends, Kinkel constantly felt isolated and wrote in his letter of admission that he constantly felt alone, meaning that he had low attachment in his relationships. Kinkel also had low commitment because he was held back in elementary school, hung out with juvenile delinquents, and committed misdemeanors like throwing debris at cars from a young age. Kinkel would ultimately be expelled from high school, lessening his commitment to society even more (Swanson, 2000).

Kinkel had low involvement in society because, even when he played football, he was a second and third string player and still felt isolated. Kinkel spent most of his leisure time in his room, researching bomb-making techniques and details of school shootings. It is reasonable to conclude that Kinkel either failed to develop social bonds or, at best, formed very weak social bonds (Swanson, 2000).

Though Kinkel seemed to have an ectomorphic body, whereas a mesomorphic body type would put him at greater risk for committing crimes (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018), Kinkel did demonstrate a propensity for violent activities. Kinkel self-selected into martial arts as a result of being bullied in elementary and middle school and tended to enjoy the physicality of the sport. Furthermore, his father signed him up for football. Kinkel played linebacker, a position that requires strength and agility to tackle offensive players (Swanson, 2000).

It is also reasonable to hypothesize that Kinkel had low intelligence when considering how he struggled in school and was held back in first grade, and I believe that intelligence is the strongest predicting factor of the biological ones for Kinkel’s crimes. Kinkel was also diagnosed with dyslexia, making language production and comprehension more difficult (Swanson, 2000). Though dyslexia

is not correlated with low levels of general intelligence, it can be correlated to low levels of verbal intelligence. Should Kinkel have had a lower verbal intelligence, it would be consistent with Hirschi and Hindelang's findings that low verbal intelligence has a significant impact on criminality (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018).

Goddard's general idea that morons are more dangerous to society than idiots may also have metaphorical value in explaining Kinkel's criminality. Morons have higher IQs than idiots, and as such, may not be recognized as being as cognitively impaired as idiots. Though Kinkel was held back in school, the video did not state that he was enrolled in fundamental-level courses or that he was receiving special education (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018). When considering that Kinkel was competent enough to research bomb-making and even develop explosives, one may hypothesize that Kinkel was actually rather average in overall intelligence, but that his struggles in verbal intelligence are more predictive of his criminality than any presumptions of his overall intelligence (Swanson, 2000).

Lastly, the fact that Kinkel quit taking Prozac on his own accord after he completed psychotherapy is another biological risk factor. Kinkel quit this antidepressant "cold-turkey," when a gradual tapering off of the medication is recommended by physicians. When considering that Kinkel had a history of depression and even may have experienced the nosology of schizophrenia, Kinkel should have been continued on pharmaceutical and/or psychotherapeutic intervention, and certainly should not have quit taking his medication prior to consulting a medical health expert (Swanson, 2000). Individuals who have experienced a major depressive episode in the past are at heightened risk to experience another one in the future, which can often be met with suicidal and, sometimes, homicidal ideations (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018). Kinkel should not have been released from medical intervention as hastily as he was.

Routine activities theory argues that a suitable target, motivated offender, and lack of guardianship are necessary for crime to occur, and I believe this theory is the strongest of the criminal opportunities theories in explaining Kinkel's behavior. Research conducted by routine activity theory academicians has determined schools to be one of the most suitable targets in contemporary American society (Tibbets & Hemmens, 2018). Since Kinkel's high school did not have metal detectors or a police officer guarding the entrance, walking into the school with firearms was an easy feat. Furthermore, Kinkel was suspended by the same high school in the past when he brought a fully loaded firearm into school and kept it in his locker (Swanson, 2000).

Kinkel was clearly a motivated offender, since he felt social isolation and believed he had no other choice but to commit mass murder to deal with his clinical depression. Lastly, the lack of metal detectors and police officers also contribute to a lack of guardianship at Thurston High School. Also, students and

faculty are not allowed to carry firearms inside schools, and despite the fact that that may make high schools safer in general, it is also true that the lack of other armed individuals in the school meant that Kinkel could continue his killing spree undeterred until students and police officers physically subdued him (Swanson, 2000).

Lifestyle factors also contributed to Kinkel's delinquency. For one, the Kinkel residence was located within the wilderness, apart from society. Though this isolation did not seem to majorly affect Kinkel's older sister - Kristen, Kinkel being spatially distant from others, particularly members of his own generation, may have exacerbated his feelings of social isolation, which contributed to his major depressive disorder. Also, Kinkel would hang around with juvenile delinquents, and although it was never stated that he was a member of a self-recognized gang, the elements of an antisocial code of ethics, including bomb-making and reckless vandalism of moving automobiles, and multiple members having been cycled through the juvenile criminal justice system, were apparent in his kith-group. Being involved with such individuals heightened Kinkel's opportunities for delinquency, and as he began accruing a criminal record, he gradually became emboldened enough and hopeless enough to commit mass murder, a commonality of most serial killers (Swanson, 2000).

Hirschi's social bonding theory is most applicable to the case study of Kip Kinkel. Through Kinkel's own admission, factors like his isolation, the humiliation that he and his family felt on account of his conduct, and being bullied all heavily contributed to his despair and, ultimately, to his offending. Furthermore, Kinkel's struggles in the classroom likely resulted in him never developing strong bonds with any teachers, nor was he a successful football player, so his coaches probably did not think much of him, either. The aforementioned factors elucidate that Kinkel not only struggled to form meaningful social bonds with his peers, but also with adult authority figures. The one exception to this trend was Kinkel's psychologist, though he lost touch with this man after his therapy was completed. Furthermore, the psychologist indulging Kinkel's obsession with firearms was an exacerbant to Kinkel's persistent lobbying to his father to purchase an arsenal of different guns (Swanson, 2000).

Though three of the four elements of Hirschi's social bond have already been discussed in relation to Kinkel, his moral beliefs may also have contributed to his criminality and inability to forge social bonds. The clearest evidence of Kinkel's moral beliefs was his interest in *Romeo and Juliet*. The Shakespearian romantic tragedy emphasizes themes of adolescents being victims of the social circumstances created by their families and death as an escape to their suffering. The modern retelling of this play, *Romeo + Juliet*, couples all of the themes present in the original work, in addition to modernly flavoring the tale with firearms as a tool to settle the issues faced by the characters. Coincidentally,

Kinkel's fascination and obsession with firearms would have likely been piqued by this telling of his favorite tale, and when considering his analytical perspectives on the efficacy of school shooters, it is not difficult to imagine how Kinkel's morality would have developed and why it would not aid him in developing prosocial relationships (Swanson, 2000).

### References

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