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TEACHING TIPS: Personal Criminal History Analysis Paper

THE "MY LIFE OF CRIME" PAPER

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Students often have difficulty visualizing the practical application of criminological theory. The following activity assists instructors to develop students' abilities in evaluating behaviors and determining the theoretical perspectives that potentially could be used to explain those behaviors. It also is designed to assist students in comprehending how their own experiences impact their views on law-violating behavior and its etiology. This exercise facilitates students' awareness of how their beliefs about the "causes" of law-violating behavior inevitably impact their beliefs about potential "solutions" or "responses" to this type of behavior. Eventually, students unfailingly begin to realize the artificial dichotomy between "us," as the "law-abiders," and "them," as the law-violators, what students perceive to be the "typical" criminal.

This activity requires each student to develop a paper entitled "My Life of Crime." We require each paper to be headed with the following signed (and witnessed) passage to ease the potential apprehension that some students may have about divulging personal information.

"The purpose of this paper is to examine my own past activities in order to better understand the causes of my behavior and that of others'. This is an educational exercise and in no way is to be seen as a confession that could in any way be used against me. I understand that only the Professor of the course and I will see the results of this analysis."

We require that the paper be developed around the following 5-section outline:

1. **Confessions:** In this section, the student describes in detail all of the "crimes" that he or she has "committed" from birth to the date of the paper submission. They are to recall their earliest memories of disobedient, delinquent, or antisocial behavior. Many students find it entertaining and personally rewarding to discuss these incidents with their parents, friends, and family in order to gain a better perspective on how they behaved in their earlier years.
2. **Explanation:** In this section, the student uses personal opinion to explain the factors ("causes") that contributed to their participation in these behaviors.
3. **Theories of Causation:** In this section, students evaluate the factors they used to explain their behaviors in the prior section, and determine at least two criminological theories or perspectives within which their "explanations" could potentially fit. In effect, they apply the theories to their own crimes. In doing so, they become more aware of the various competing understandings of how behaviors develop, evolve, persist, and desist.
4. **Response:** In this section, students discuss what actions could have impacted their participation in criminal behaviors (prevented them, decreased them, changed them). They also briefly describe what they believe may have happened to them if any of their "crimes" had resulted in their incarceration.
5. **Conclusion:** Finally, students describe what they have learned from participating in this assignment about themselves and about their own views of criminal behavior.

We offer a pre- and post-paper briefing to students to increase its effectiveness as a teachable moment. In the briefing, we explain the requirements for the paper, and ensure that students understand the purpose of the paper and are comfortable with the assignment. We define "crime," "committed," and "confession" within the context of this paper. Students are repeatedly advised that they are not to discuss any events in their past which they do not wish. We also clearly stress that the purpose of the paper is not simply for them to report past embarrassing or criminal behavior, but to look deeply into themselves to better understand the behavior of others.
