

Sentencing, Harm, and Severity: Do Perceptions Differ Based on the Creativity of a Crime?

Hansika Kapoor   1, 2

Apoorva Thakur  1

Sarah Rezaei  1

James C Kaufman  2

1. Department of Psychology, Monk Prayogshala, Mumbai, India

2. Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

Published on 09/11/2026

Outcomes Report

DOI: [10.71240/lcyc.461782](https://doi.org/10.71240/lcyc.461782)



Abstract

Perceptions of crimes are shaped not only by the nature of the act itself but also by factors such as their novelty, a person's moral foundations, personality traits, and cultural contexts. Building on previous studies, the present study investigated how these interpersonal factors, as well as the creativity of a crime, influence crime perception. Eight crime scenarios were developed based on creativity (creative vs. non-creative) and moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous) in accordance with the AMORAL model of dark creativity. A sample of adults from India (N = 279) and the US (N = 336) rated the crime scenarios presented to them, which were counterbalanced for creativity and moral valence, followed by psychometric measures related to morality, creativity, and personality. Data were analysed using ANOVA, MANOVA, and hierarchical and mixed-effects regression models, along with some exploratory analyses. Moral valence was a consistent predictor, with evil crimes receiving the highest ratings, followed by sinful, ambiguous, and self-interested crimes across the outcome variables. While creativity alone did not influence perception of crimes, some significant differences emerged through its interaction with moral valence.

A Research Plan for this Outcomes Report was published in Lifecycle Journal here: <https://lifecycle-flax.fly.dev/journal/articles//151/index.html>

Registration

Registration associated with the LifeCycle Journal Research Plan is available, along with the previous pre-registration made for the study. The links to both are provided below.

<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/MW8RC>

<https://osf.io/cd8pz/overview>

Materials

The available components such as the measures and materials used for the study, can be found in the osf project associated with the LifeCycle journal submission.

<https://osf.io/nu83c>

Data

Data used for the study is now available at the OSF project associated with the submission.

<https://osf.io/5s7ne>

Code

Analysis code and results file can be found with the submission and OSF project associated with the submission.

<https://osf.io/zayqb>

<https://osf.io/dbhj6>

Paper

Sentencing, Harm, and Severity: Do Perceptions Differ Based on the Creativity of a Crime?

Hansika Kapoor, Apoorva Thakur, Sarah Rezaei, James C. Kaufman

Introduction

Public perceptions of crime severity, harm, and punishment are shaped by various factors, including the nature of the crime, its creativity, and societal values (Ashby, 2018). For instance, the context of the crime (Vogel & Meeker, 2001) can impact its perceived seriousness, especially prior exposure to crime scenarios (Rodríguez & Blanco, 2016) and exposure to television news (Adriaenssen et al., 2020). For example, if someone is exposed to gruesome acts more often, they are more likely to associate lighter punishments with a less severe crime. Conversely, if someone lives in a neighbourhood with a high crime rate, they may relate to the crime scenarios and deem them less serious. In general, the number of local crimes and damage caused to an individual or society can affect public perceptions of harm and severity.

Prior research further shows that punishment judgments are primarily driven by perceptions of moral deservingness rather than utilitarian goals such as deterrence, with individuals assigning punishment based on the harm caused and what the offender is perceived to deserve (Carlsmith et al., 2002). However, large-scale data identified a disconnect between the perception of crime rate among American citizens and reported crimes. American citizens believe that the rate of crime is going up, while the number of reported crimes has decreased over time; however, this perception is more prominent about nationwide crime than their own local communities (Gramlich, 2024). Moreover, a survey by the Pew Research Center showed that frequent consumption of crime news is associated with negative emotional responses and heightened concern related to harm and severity, regardless of the crime rates in their community (Eddy et al., 2024). Additionally, the role of legal knowledge affects how crime is perceived; for example, a study showed that jurors who have a higher level of legal knowledge tend to give severe sentences, compared to those with a low level of legal knowledge (Finkelstein & Bastounis, 2010). These findings suggest that multiple factors, beyond exposure to crime, influence perceptions of crime; these include media exposure and cognitive processes. For example, a study by (Sotirovic, 2001) explored the effect of type of media exposure on cognitive processes and found that those who use complex media (hard news) are more likely to support preventative policies, while those who consume infotainment media such as talk shows, pseudo-news, and magazine shows are more likely to support punitive policies. This is because hard news outlets often lead to complexity in thinking, whereas soft-media shows

limit complexity and promote fear. While such factors can influence judgment of crime, little is known about how crime characteristics like novelty and creativity can influence these perceptions.

Creativity in Crime

Lawbreaking can involve creativity when individuals try to break legal or societal norms (Cropley & Cropley, 2011). As creativity comprises original and context-appropriate ideas (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), creative criminal activities may be more effective in meeting nefarious goals as compared to mundane crimes (Cropley & Cropley, 2011). Cropley et al. (2008) illustrated how creativity is used in crimes ranging from fraud to terrorism using a functional model of malevolent creativity. This form of dark creativity refers to the use of novel ideas to meet harmful ends.

Beyond the role of creativity in malevolent acts, research has also examined laypersons' perceptions of malevolent creativity, demonstrating that their reactions differed based on how creativity was perceived—clever, harmful, or morally ambiguous (Cropley et al., 2014). Later, the AMORAL model of dark creativity (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2022) delineated the valence range of creative acts, from noble and benevolent through to ambiguous, and finally evil. Although the model has been applied across diverse contexts such as deception (Kapoor et al., 2026), misinformation (Kapoor & Puthillam, 2024), and leadership (Zhao et al., 2025), its application to criminal behavior in terms of creativity remains unexplored.

In a similar line of research, other work has explored parallels between artistic and criminal creativity, finding that both rely on originality and thinking differently from the “norm” (Gamman & Raein, 2010). This suggests that creativity in a crime may evoke admiration or criticism, influencing public perceptions of its severity. Conservative values and legal cynicism are also predictors of perceptions of crime seriousness (Adriaenssen et al., 2019), indicating that creative crimes can be perceived differently depending on cultural and moral frameworks. Nevertheless, the relationship between the perceived creativity of a crime and its appropriate punishment is complex. Piquero and colleagues (2012) studied the public perceptions of punishment certainty and severity, reporting that less traditional crimes often elicit more varied responses. The same is observed in research on white-collar crimes, where public opinion does not always have a common consensus (Amos et al., 2024; Simpson et al., 2023), which suggests the complexity of how non-conventional crimes are perceived differently from traditional crimes. However, despite the role of creativity, reactions towards crimes are not solely shaped by the features of the crime itself, but by personal factors of individual observers.

Personality, Morality, and Perception of Crime

In terms of personality, creativity, and lawbreaking activities, Lebuda et al. (2021) report traits like openness to experience and risk-taking as common predictors of both creative achievements and lawbreaking behaviors. On the other hand, with respect to the perception of crime, research

suggests that those who score low on agreeableness and high on conscientiousness and extraversion show anger and a desire to punish the aggressor; surprisingly, neuroticism did not exhibit a significant effect on their decisions (Roberts et al., 2013). For dark personality traits, Machiavellianism was a strong predictor of punitiveness and penal attitudes, along with conservative ideology (Clemente et al., 2025). Another study showed that only psychopathy predicted a more tolerant attitude towards white-collar crimes. It should be noted that the results were not significant for Machiavellianism and narcissism (Amos et al., 2024).

Canton (2015) used the Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009, 2013) to argue that reactions and attitudes towards crime punishment stem from moral intuitions rather than objective reason. The study suggests that these reactions are drawn from moral foundations. For example, for those with high loyalty, the person who commits a crime becomes an out-group member, as the crime becomes an event where social values can be asserted, and the one who violates the norm can be punished. Similarly, other moral foundations like care/harm (care and compassion towards the victim lead to more punitive measures against perpetrator), fairness/cheating (transactional, would try to create balance when giving retribution towards perpetrator), authority/subversion (roles played by people relating to social hierarchy, for example, police officers and society), sanctity/degradation (certain crimes may ignite feelings of disgust for some people), and liberty/oppression (severe criticism towards oppression of weaker groups, human rights violations, etc.) show distinct emotional reactions, which in turn influence judgment towards crime, punishment, and deservingness. This is also supported by dark creativity research, suggesting that people who show lesser concerns towards binding and individualizing foundations are likely to be more malevolently creative, and this is mediated by dark personality traits (Kapoor et al., 2025). However, another study found that lower individualizing moral foundations were associated with higher creativity in prosocial deceptive tasks, while in antisocial deceptive tasks, lower moral disengagement was associated with greater creativity, suggesting that stronger moral concerns do not necessarily prevent individuals from generating harmful ideas (Kapoor et al., 2026).

Furthermore, Canton (2015) suggests that people link logic and moral stances when making judgments about a crime. This was demonstrated empirically in the finding that moral foundations, along with ideology (both political and religious), predicted attitudes towards crime punishments (Silver & Silver, 2017). Specifically, binding foundations and conservatism strongly predicted greater punitiveness, whereas individualizing foundations and less conservative attitudes were associated with lesser punitiveness. The moral foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Purity are considered group-oriented or binding because they emphasize adherence to group norms, rules, and traditions. Violating these foundations is therefore seen as violating society itself (Graham et al., 2009). For individuals who strongly endorse these foundations, offenders, i.e., those who break social rules, may be perceived as committing a moral transgression against the broader community. As a result, stronger binding foundations may be linked to harsher, offender-focused punitive attitudes. It is also observed that more often than not, people are likely to rely on their

moral outrage and deservingness when giving judgments and sentencing recommendations for a crime, rather than focusing on future prevention (Carlsmith et al., 2002). Furthermore, moral foundations theory explains jurors' decisions as well. Here, individualizing foundations (for example, care/harm) lead to leniency in decisions, and in contrast, binding foundations lead to harsher sentencing decisions. Overall, there were some exceptions, such as if a child is the victim, then the care and fairness foundation is salient (Vaughan et al., 2019). Taken together, this literature shows that personality and moral intuitions significantly shape punitive attitudes.

Current study

As evident from past studies, despite the theoretical work being available for malevolent creativity, no empirical work has explicitly studied how the creative and moral features of a crime alter its perception. Hence, this study aims to understand layperson perceptions of severity, harm, need for rehabilitation, and sentencing for crimes associated with robbery and theft. These crimes will vary based on their creativity (2 levels) and moral valence (4 levels). Creative crimes illustrate novel and innovative ways of committing an offense, whereas non-creative crimes are based on more straightforward and traditional ways of committing the same. The moral valence of crimes will vary based on four levels of valence according to the AMORAL model of dark creativity (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2022): evil, sinful, self-interested, and ambiguous. Further, the study aims to understand the association between crime perceptions and factors including the dark tetrad personality traits, perceived level of legal knowledge, and moral foundations, across crime categories. Additionally, the study aims to understand the difference between Indian and American cultures in creative crime perception.

Based on this background, we propose the following pre-registered hypotheses^{1,2}:

H1: Non-creative crimes will consistently receive higher ratings for severity, harm, sentencing, and rehabilitation recommendations compared to creative crimes of the same valence, across all levels of moral valence.

H2a: Crimes with “evil” moral valence will receive higher ratings for severity, harmfulness, sentencing, and rehabilitation recommendations compared to crimes with other moral valences, regardless of creativity.

H2b: Crimes with “ambiguous” moral valence will receive lower ratings for severity, harmfulness, sentencing, and rehabilitation recommendations compared to crimes with other moral valences, regardless of creativity.

H3: Ratings of crime severity will be predicted by sociodemographics, personality traits, moral foundations, creative self-efficacy, perceived legal knowledge, crime creativity (creative vs non-creative), moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous), and the interaction between crime creativity and moral valence

H4: Ratings of crime harmfulness will be predicted by sociodemographics, personality traits, moral foundations, creative self-efficacy, perceived legal knowledge, crime creativity (creative vs non-creative), moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous), and the interaction between crime creativity and moral valence

H5: Sentencing recommendations will be predicted by sociodemographics, personality traits, moral foundations, creative self-efficacy, perceived legal knowledge, crime creativity (creative vs non-creative), moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous), and the interaction between crime creativity and moral valence

H6: Rehabilitation recommendations will be predicted by sociodemographics, personality traits, moral foundations, creative self-efficacy, perceived legal knowledge, crime creativity (creative vs non-creative), moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous), and the interaction between crime creativity and moral valence

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

A power analysis was computed using G*Power (ver. 3.1.9.7). Following Simonsohn's (2015) recommendations on adjusting inflated effect sizes, we assigned the prior study 33% power and used a more conservative effect size of $f^2 = 0.32$. Using a power of 0.95, an alpha level of 0.05, and 19 predictors, to estimate a required sample size of approximately 111 participants. The predictors consisted of 4 sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education, and socio-economic status), dark personality tetrad (4 variables), moral foundations (2 variables - individualizing and binding foundations), creative self-efficacy, and perceived legal knowledge along with the two IVs of crime type (creative, non-creative) and their moral valence (evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous) along with their interaction (8 combinations). Our target sample size was $111 * 2 = 222$ participants. To avoid fatigue and practice effects, participants responded to only 4 out of 8 situations; therefore, we doubled the sample size to 222 participants to maintain equivalent statistical power across crime scenarios. Furthermore, for cross-cultural comparison between India (IND) and the United States (US), the total sample was doubled again to ensure adequate representation from each country. The total target sample size was 444 participants (222 participants per country). To account for an estimated 10% attrition rate, we aimed to recruit up to 488 participants.

Indian participants were recruited by circulating the Qualtrics form on social media platforms ($N = 128$) as well as from BeSample ($N = 134$). Participants from the USA ($N = 390$) were recruited from the University of Connecticut's participant pool. Out of the Indian participants (excluding those recruited from BeSample) who provided their email addresses for the raffle, ten received an Amazon gift card (INR 750) as an incentive. Participants from the USA received course credits, while

each BeSample participant received a payout of USD 0.75 through the platform. Individuals 18 years and above from India and the USA were able to participate in the study. Participants needed to have a self-reported English proficiency of at least 5 out of 10 and pass at least one attention check.

A total of 668 participants responded to the survey. After cleaning for self-reported English proficiency and attention checks, data from 632 participants was retained for the final analysis (287 men, 365 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 23.45$ years, $SD = 8.53$, range: 18—70; about 40% had a Bachelor's degree or higher; 33.43% were employed or self-employed, and 62% were students; 17% were married and 79% were single; 67% practiced Hinduism, 8% Christianity, and 10% Islam), 61% were white, 18% were Asian, and 5% were African Americans.

Design

An experiment was designed using Qualtrics and was circulated online. Participants were first required to give their consent before starting the study. After agreeing to participate, they were asked to provide some demographic information. Each participant was presented with four crime scenarios, two creative and two non-creative situations, with each scenario representing a unique moral valence category (evil, self-interested, sinful, and ambiguous). The order of scenario presentation was fully randomized and counterbalanced for each participant. Additionally, the assignment of creative and non-creative conditions to the moral valence categories was randomized, ensuring that no fixed pairing or sequence was maintained.

Measures³

Short Dark Tetrad-4 scale (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2021)

A self-report tool measured four dark personality traits: Machiavellianism ($\alpha = 0.75$, $\omega = 0.83$), narcissism ($\alpha = 0.80$, $\omega = 0.86$), psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.86$, $\omega = 0.88$), and sadism ($\alpha = 0.80$, $\omega = 0.84$). SD4 consists of 28 items (7 items for each subscale) rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011)

This scale measures five dimensions of morality: care/harm ($\alpha = 0.69$, $\omega = 0.80$), fairness/reciprocity ($\alpha = 0.69$, $\omega = 0.80$), loyalty ($\alpha = 0.69$, $\omega = 0.80$), authority/respect ($\alpha = 0.66$, $\omega = 0.74$), and purity/sanctity ($\alpha = 0.68$, $\omega = 0.76$). Care and fairness are individualizing foundations ($\alpha = 0.82$, $\omega = 0.86$), while loyalty, authority, and purity are binding foundations ($\alpha = 0.85$, $\omega = 0.88$). MFQ consists of 32 items measured on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = not at all relevant to 5 = extremely relevant for 16 items and from 0 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree for the rest.

Creative Self-Efficacy Scale (CSE; Kaufman & Baer, 2004)

This scale consists of 6 items, and responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree ($\alpha = 0.76$, $\omega = 0.86$).

Perceived Legal Knowledge⁴

Perceived legal knowledge was measured using a self-report scale where participants rated their legal knowledge on a scale of 0 = No familiarity with laws or regulations related to crimes to 10 = Extensive knowledge of criminal law, including in-depth understanding of offenses, penalties, and legal procedures.

Crime Scenarios⁵

Participants were presented with four crime scenarios (counterbalanced for creativity and moral valence) and were asked to assess the moral valence, creativity, harm, and seriousness of the crime, followed by selecting the level of sentencing and rehabilitation for these crimes.

Moral Valence (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2022)

Moral Valence (e.g., evil, sinful, self-interested, ambiguous) of the crime scenarios was rated based on the AMORAL model of dark creativity on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = evil, 2 = sinful, 3 = self-interested, 4 = ambiguous, 5 = neutral, and 6 = Noble). Participants' ratings on these parameters were used for a manipulation check.

Creativity Rating Scale

Creativity of the crime scenarios were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all creative to 6 = Very creative, to measure the perceived novelty and innovation of the scenarios. Similar to the moral valence ratings, creativity ratings by the participants were used as a manipulation check.

Harm Severity Scale (Van De Weetering et al., 2024)

This measured participants' perception of the level of harm depicted by the crime scenarios, rated on an 11-point Likert scale of 0 = Not harmful to 10 = Very harmful.

Crime Severity Scale (Van De Weetering et al., 2024)

It measured the perceived level of severity depicted by the crime scenarios rated on an 11-point Likert scale of 0 = Not serious to 10 = Very serious.

Sentencing Scale

Participants rated the level of sentencing they would give for each crime scenario on an 11-point Likert Scale, ranging from 0 = No consequences to 10 = life imprisonment.

Rehabilitation Recommendation (Forsberg & Douglas, 2022)

Participants' perception of the level of rehabilitation required for each crime scenario was measured on an 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = No rehabilitation required to 10 = Offender reintegration is the primary goal, minimal to no punitive measures.

Attention Checks

Two questions were asked to test whether participants were paying attention. The first one reads, "Roses are red, violets are blue, show us how much attention is being paid by you. Select the option to 'strongly agree.'" This was included randomly within the SD4. Next, a similar question was included randomly in the survey, such as "Enter 853 in the following text box to show us you are paying attention." Participants had to correctly respond to at least one of the two.

Results

Data analysis was conducted on RStudio (RStudio Team, 2023). Sample descriptives and zero-order correlations are displayed in Table 1. The analysis code is available on OSF.

For H1, a series of one-way between-groups ANOVAs were conducted. The means, standard deviations, and F-values of the ANOVAs can be found in Table 2. For ambiguous crimes, creative crimes received higher severity, harm, and sentencing ratings compared to non-creative crimes. However, there was no significant difference in rehabilitation ratings. For self-interested crimes, creative crimes received higher severity, harm, sentencing, and rehabilitation ratings compared to non-creative crimes. However, for sinful and evil crimes, there were no significant differences between creative and non-creative crimes for severity, harm, sentencing, or rehabilitation.

MANOVA analysis revealed that moral valences do have a significant effect on perception of crimes in terms of severity, harm, sentencing, or rehabilitation (Table 3a). Follow-up post-hoc analysis showed that crimes with evil moral valence were rated highest across the DVs, followed by sinful crimes, then ambiguous crimes, with self-interested crimes rated lowest (Table 3b). All paired comparisons were statistically significant. As proposed by H2a, evil crimes received higher severity, harm, sentencing, and rehabilitation ratings than all other moral valence conditions. For H2b, ANOVA analyses revealed that self-interested crimes received the lowest ratings across the DVs, contrary to the prediction. Ambiguous crimes had the second-lowest ratings, followed by sinful and evil crimes. All the paired comparisons were significant.

Role of creativity and moral valence of a crime on its perception

For H3-H6, a salient pattern emerged: there was no effect of creativity on crime on any of the outcome variables. However, for moral valence, evil crimes received the highest ratings, followed by sinful, ambiguous, and self-interested crimes. There were some interesting results for the interaction of creativity and moral valence across all the models. Specifically, non-creative ambiguous crimes consistently received lower ratings than creative ambiguous crimes for H3-H6, indicating that creativity increased judgments across all the outcome variables in morally ambiguous contexts. Similarly, non-creative self-interested crimes received lower ratings than creative crimes for harmfulness (H4), sentencing (H5), and rehabilitation (H6); however, this effect was not observed for severity of crime (H3), with creativity and self-interested crimes having no significant interaction. On the other hand, no significant differences were observed for sinful crimes. Tables 4–7 display the hierarchical mixed-methods models for these analyses.

Individual differences in perception of crime

The individual difference predictors varied across the four hypotheses. Table 4 displays the mixed-effects models for severity of crime. When it came to severity of crime (H3), men, individuals with lower psychopathy but higher binding moral foundations, and those with more perceived legal knowledge rated crimes more severely. Table 5 displays the mixed-effects models for harmfulness of crime. Older individuals, men, individuals higher in narcissism and binding moral foundations, and those with greater perceived legal knowledge perceived crimes as more harmful (H4). Table 6 displays the mixed-effects models for sentencing recommendations of crime. Men, individuals lower in psychopathy but higher in Machiavellianism, recommended harsher sentences (H5). Table 7 displays the mixed-effects models for rehabilitation recommendations of crime. Individuals with higher education and stronger binding moral foundations provided higher rehabilitation recommendations (H6).

The Role of Perceived Legal Knowledge and Moral Valence on Crime Perception

Along with the main hypotheses, some exploratory analyses were also conducted. The role of perceived legal knowledge and moral judgment was explored to understand how individuals perceive crimes (Table 8). Sentencing judgments were primarily influenced by moral valence, with evil crimes receiving the harshest sentencing recommendations, followed by sinful, ambiguous, and self-interested crimes. Perceived legal knowledge was associated with reduced sentencing severity, particularly for evil crimes, indicating that this moderates punitive judgment decisions. This suggests that individuals who perceived themselves as more knowledgeable about the legal system recommended less severe punishments when evaluating evil crimes.

Cross-cultural analysis⁶

To understand the cultural differences in the perception of crimes based on the outcome variables, we further performed cross-cultural analysis with the data from the participants in the USA. Similar to the main analysis, creativity did not have a significant effect on the outcome variables and, for moral valence, evil crimes received the highest ratings for all the DVs, followed by sinful, ambiguous, and self-interested crimes.

Table 9 displays final mixed-methods models associated with the outcome variables. Across all models, country of origin did not significantly predict severity, sentencing, or rehabilitation, but had a significant effect on harm ratings, indicating that participants from India rated crimes as more harmful than participants from the United States. Furthermore, even with the introduction of nationality in the models, gender remained a significant predictor of severity, harmfulness, and sentencing, but not rehabilitation recommendations. This suggests that regardless of country of origin, men perceived crimes as more severe and harmful and recommended harsher sentences than women. Education significantly predicted rehabilitation recommendations, indicating that participants with higher levels of education provided higher rehabilitation ratings.

Socioeconomic status was only associated with harmfulness ratings. When it came to moral foundations, higher binding moral foundations were only associated with higher severity and harmfulness ratings. On the other hand, higher individualizing moral foundations were associated with higher sentencing recommendations. Perceived legal knowledge was a significant predictor of both severity and harmfulness ratings, but it did not predict sentencing and rehabilitation recommendations.

Clustering analysis

A cluster analysis was conducted on participants' average ratings of crime severity, harmfulness, sentencing recommendations, and rehabilitation recommendations. Hopkins statistic indicated excellent cluster structure, suggesting that meaningful clusters were present in the data. According to the elbow plot and principal component analysis (PCA), a three-cluster solution seemed appropriate. However, further inspection with the Hubert index and D index indicated that a two-cluster solution provided the optimal fit to the data (see Figure 6a and 6b).

The resulting clusters differed consistently across all four outcome variables. Participants in Cluster 1 reported lower average ratings of severity ($M = 5.99$), harmfulness ($M = 5.44$), sentencing recommendations ($M = 5.24$), and rehabilitation recommendations ($M = 3.32$). In contrast, participants in Cluster 2 assigned higher ratings of severity ($M = 8.07$), harmfulness ($M = 7.58$), sentencing recommendations ($M = 6.62$), and rehabilitation recommendations ($M = 5.10$). Thus, participants who perceived crimes as more severe and harmful also tended to recommend both

harsher punishment and greater rehabilitation, whereas those assigning lower severity and harmfulness ratings also recommended lower levels of punishment and rehabilitation.

A heatmap illustrating the standardized psychological profiles of the two clusters is presented in Figure 7. To characterize the psychological profiles of the two clusters, independent-samples t-tests were also conducted on the individual difference variables. Among the Dark Tetrad traits, only narcissism significantly differed between clusters, with participants in Cluster 2 reporting higher narcissism scores than those in Cluster 1, $t = -2.68$, $p < .05$. No significant differences were observed for psychopathy, Machiavellianism, or sadism. Participants in Cluster 2 reported higher scores on individualizing moral foundations, $t = -5.13$, $p < .001$; binding moral foundations, $t = -3.58$, $p < .001$; perceived legal knowledge, $t = -5.11$, $p < .001$; and creative self-efficacy, $t = -2.34$, $p < .05$, compared to participants in Cluster 1.

Discussion

Initial scholarship on dark creativity used crime as an important domain of investigation, ranging from novel *modus operandi* to original ways of causing maximum harm (D. H. Cropley et al., 2008b; Eisenman, 2010; Gill et al., 2013). Although later research studied how creative and innovative terrorist attacks were (Logan et al., 2020, 2023), the interaction of criminal behavior with levels of dark creativity was yet to be examined. In the present study, we aimed to study creative and non-creative crimes across the AMORAL moral valence range from ambiguous to evil acts (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2022). Specifically, we investigated how crimes are perceived in terms of seriousness, harmfulness, sentencing, and rehabilitation judgments.

Contrary to our proposed hypothesis (H1), the results did not support the predicted direction of perception of creative and non-creative crimes. For instance, creative-ambiguous and creative-self-interested crimes were judged as more serious, harmful, and received harsher sentences compared to their non-creative counterparts, suggesting that in some moral contexts creativity may show a reverse direction, as opposed to our hypotheses, i.e., creativity may increase rather than decrease negative evaluation of crimes. However, only self-interested creative crimes received higher creative ratings than non-creative self-interested crimes. Notably, these effects were not observed for sinful and evil crimes, suggesting that creativity in crimes does not override more morally reprehensible acts and thereby does not affect overall judgments in these moral contexts. However, when examining the overall effect of creativity on H3-H6, creativity alone did not predict crime judgments across all outcome variables. Rather, the effect of creativity was found to be dependent on the moral valence, reflected by the significant interactions, which suggests that simply presenting a creative version of a crime is insufficient to alter perceptions once the nature of the offense is considered.

Although crime perceptions were not affected by whether a crime was creatively executed or not, the degree of moral valence in the crime scenario was a strong predictor. Evil crimes were rated as the most severe and harmful, deserving high sentences and greater rehabilitation as compared to all others. Although we predicted a linear decrease in harshness of judgements as the level of moral valence moved from evil to sinful, self-interested, and ambiguous crimes, this was found only partially. Contrary to predictions, ambiguous crimes received higher ratings compared to self-interested ones. A possible explanation for this result is similar to the findings by Hester et al., (2020) which found that when an actor's intentions are rooted in moral ambiguity, they were more likely to be judged immoral; i.e., ambiguity surrounding an act may contribute to more negative evaluations.

Individual Differences in Crime Perception

Higher Machiavellianism was associated with harsher sentencing, as this trait has been identified as the strongest Dark Tetrad predictor of punitive attitudes (Clemente et al., 2025). Lower psychopathy predicted greater perceived crime severity and higher sentencing recommendations. A recent study examining Dark Tetrad traits (Fino et al., 2025) found that lower psychopathy was associated with punitive attitudes in the Romanian sample, although they did not observe the same for the UK sample. Despite this finding, it should be noted that past literature has shown a positive relationship between psychopathy and punitive attitudes (Amos et al., 2024). This association found in the present study may reflect the context-specific nature of the judgments, i.e., an experimental design, as different crime scenarios were evaluated by participants and the judgments were made in response to those, rather than general attitudes towards a crime. Narcissism, on the other hand, was only associated with the perception of harmfulness.

Binding moral foundations consistently predicted greater crime severity, perceived harm, and rehabilitation recommendations, suggesting that individuals who prioritize social order, authority, and group cohesion evaluate criminal behavior more negatively. The same was observed in the cross-cultural analysis between Indian (collectivistic, binding) and American (individualistic, individualising) participants, which suggests that even with differences in cultural background, individuals with stronger binding moral foundations perceive crimes as more severe and harmful (Jørgensen & Nilsson, 2026; Silver, 2020). This is partially in line with a study by Silver (2017), which suggests that people high in binding foundations perceive crime as a violation of group norms and social order, making them more punitive toward offenders. Similarly, another study found that binding moral foundations are associated with more punitive orientations, whereas individualizing foundations are associated with greater leniency (Vaughan et al., 2019); however, our findings suggest that this relationship may be more nuanced, as stronger binding foundations were associated with more negative perceptions of crime, which did not translate into harsher sentencing.

In general, men judged crimes as more severe and harmful, giving harsher punishments, compared to women. This particular finding contrasts with previous literature on perceived severity (Borg & Hermann, 2023) and fear of crime (Schafer et al., 2006), which has consistently shown that women tend to perceive most crimes as more severe and harmful, and this effect held for different degrees of crime. However, past work has noted gender differences based on the type of crime (Chataway & Hart, 2019); for example, men are more likely to perceive white-collar crimes as more severe than women (Dodge et al., 2013). Furthermore, the role of age suggested that older individuals also perceived crimes to be more harmful, which is consistent with research on badness (Borg & Hermann, 2023) and fear of crime (Köber et al., 2022; Russo et al., 2013).

Higher education was associated with greater support for rehabilitation, suggesting that educational background is associated with greater support towards reform-oriented approaches to offending. Our finding extends past research which found a similar relationship between higher education and rehabilitative measures for juvenile offenders (Piquero et al., 2010). Higher socioeconomic status (SES) was associated with greater perceived harmfulness, although this effect was not observed across the other outcomes. This contradicts previous findings, given that previous research on fear of crime has often reported individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds generally reporting greater fear and vulnerability towards crime (Rader et al., 2012). This distinction may reflect a difference in perception of harm due to personal vulnerability versus evaluation of harm caused by the crime.

Exploratory Findings

Furthermore, the role of perceived legal knowledge was examined in exploratory analyses to gain more insight into the role of this factor in crime judgments. Individuals who perceived themselves as more knowledgeable about the legal system appeared less likely to recommend severe punishments for evil crimes, which is partially consistent with a study that found that among laypeople, individuals with greater knowledge of the criminal justice system show less punitive attitudes; however, it does not translate to actual sentencing decisions (Kääriäinen, 2019). Kääriäinen (2019) found some mixed directions for the role of knowledge in crime decision-making; for example, for crimes like street violence it generally showed lower punitiveness, whereas for sexual abuse it showed harsher punitiveness.

Next, cross-cultural analysis showed that Indian participants perceived the crimes as more harmful than participants from the United States, which may reflect differences in how the consequences of criminal behaviour are understood or emphasized across cultural contexts. Perhaps this is because harmfulness may be a more subjective evaluation of the consequences of an offence, while severity and sentencing may be more closely tied to shared understandings of wrongdoing and appropriate punishment.

Furthermore, the cluster analysis provided a complementary perspective on individual differences by identifying two broad profiles of crime perception based on participants' responses. Rather than suggesting a simple distinction between punishment-oriented and rehabilitation-oriented individuals, which has been previously studied (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2024; Jonson et al., 2024) the results indicated that participants differ in their overall evaluations. Participants in cluster 2 viewed crimes as more severe and harmful and recommended harsher sentences also expressed support for greater rehabilitation. Thus, participants may not have inverse views of punishments and rehabilitation but may favour an intervention-based approach to crime, while endorsing both harsher sentences and greater rehabilitation. Rather than an inverse relationship, higher sentencing and greater rehabilitation recommendations can be viewed as complementary to one another.

The psychological profiles provide further insight into this broader evaluative orientation. The higher-evaluation profile was characterized by stronger moral foundations and greater perceived legal knowledge, suggesting that higher moral reasoning and higher perceptions of legal understanding may be relevant to how strongly individuals evaluate criminal behaviour. On the other hand, the role of dark tetrad traits was limited, suggesting that the role of moral foundations and legal knowledge may be more important in perceptions of crime, with narcissism being the only exception.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

A major strength of this paper would be the introduction of the integration of the two domains, that is, creativity and crime, as this is a new area of research. While previous research has expanded on variables such as personality, moral foundations, and political orientations, the current study extends this existing framework by examining whether the creativity of a crime and how it can consequently influence its perception. This allows for a more nuanced approach to how perception and judgment associated with a crime are made. Further, we compare whether the moral valence of a crime also influences this perception, along with creativity, which provides a moral context to the crime, allowing interaction between these two experimental manipulations. Our findings related to ambiguous and self-interested crimes suggest that creativity and how it influences crime may be related to the moral context of the crime. The study, being a novel area of research, also calls for more refinement if future studies want to further examine the relationship between creativity and crime perception.

This study is not without limitations. One major limitation of the study was the manipulation and framing of creative crimes. Although the scenarios were designed to distinguish creative from non-creative crimes, the creative versions necessarily introduced additional behaviours and details beyond those present in the non-creative versions; this may have led to a perception of elaboration

and complexity, rather than an impression of creativity itself. This limitation is particularly relevant given that creativity did not produce a consistent main effect across the outcome measures.

The subjective nature of the perceived legal knowledge scale is another limitation, as it is not a true quantification of an individual's legal knowledge. In future studies, researchers could focus on context-specific measures of participants' familiarity with legal contexts (e.g., consumption of true crime content, (see, Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2026). Further, since much of past literature also studied how jurors and judges make judgments associated with crimes, the same can be examined in the context of creativity and crime.

Conclusion

The relationship between creativity and crime may be more nuanced than it is shown in this study. The results suggest that the perception of crime may be influenced by more than its characteristics, but rather, through personal characteristics and individual differences in terms of moral reasoning and personality traits. One of the aims of this study was to explore whether the domains of creativity and crime can be interrelated, but also how exactly creativity may play a role in influencing people's perception of different types of crimes. While creativity alone may not have influenced crime perceptions, it showed some significant results when paired with moral contexts. This highlights the importance of considering creativity alongside the broader context of a crime, rather than studying it as a standalone characteristic. By introducing creativity into the study of legal judgments, this research provides a foundation for further investigation into how characteristics of an offence can shape its perception.

Supporting Information

Supporting information files related to this work can be found here: <https://osf.io/cvx2b/files/5qd8c>

References

- Adriaenssen, A., Karstedt, S., Paoli, L., & Visschers, J. (2019). Taking Crime Seriously: Conservation Values and Legal Cynicism as Predictors of Public Perceptions of the Seriousness of Crime. *International Criminal Justice Review*, 29(4), 317–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567718824391>
- Adriaenssen, A., Visschers, J., Van Den Bulck, J., & Paoli, L. (2020). Public Perceptions of the Seriousness of Crimes: To What Extent are They Driven by Television Exposure? *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 26(4), 481–500. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-019-09418-2>

Amos, B., Longpré, N., & Roos, M. D. (2024). The Dark Triad of Personality: Attitudes and Beliefs Towards White-Collar Crime. *Journal of White Collar and Corporate Crime*, 5(1), 58–73.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2631309X221120002>

Ashby, M. P. J. (2018). Comparing Methods for Measuring Crime Harm/Severity. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 12(4), 439–454. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pax049>

Borg, I., & Hermann, D. (2023). Attitudes toward crime(s) and their relations to gender, age, and personal values. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 100111.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2023.100111>

Canton, R. (2015). Crime, punishment and the moral emotions: Righteous minds and their attitudes towards punishment. *Punishment & Society*, 17(1), 54–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474514548806>

Carlsmith, K. M., Darley, J. M., & Robinson, P. H. (2002). Why do we punish? Deterrence and just deserts as motives for punishment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(2), 284–299.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.2.284>

Chataway, M. L., & Hart, T. C. (2019). A Social-Psychological Process of “Fear of Crime” for Men and Women: Revisiting Gender Differences from a New Perspective. *Victims & Offenders*, 14(2), 143–164.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2018.1552221>

Clemente, M., Espinosa, P., Cerezo, A., Aguilar-Valera, J. A., Bello-San-Juan, P., Guevara-Cordero, C. K., Quintero-Cárdenas, C. J., Reynoso-González, O. U., & Ferreiros, L. (2025). Attitudes towards the penal system, ideology and dark traits. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 30(1), 83–91.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12268>

Cropley, A., & Cropley, D. (2011). Creativity and Lawbreaking. *Creativity Research Journal*, 23(4), 313–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2011.621817>

Cropley, D. H., Kaufman, J. C., & Cropley, A. J. (2008a). Malevolent Creativity: A Functional Model of Creativity in Terrorism and Crime. *Creativity Research Journal*, 20(2), 105–115.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10400410802059424>

Cropley, D. H., Kaufman, J. C., & Cropley, A. J. (2008b). Malevolent Creativity: A Functional Model of Creativity in Terrorism and Crime. *Creativity Research Journal*, 20(2), 105–115.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10400410802059424>

Cropley, D. H., Kaufman, J. C., White, A. E., & Chiera, B. A. (2014). Layperson perceptions of malevolent creativity: The good, the bad, and the ambiguous. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 8(4), 400–412. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037792>

Dodge, M., Bosick, S. J., & Antwerp, V. V. (2013). Do Men and Women Perceive White-Collar and Street Crime Differently? Exploring Gender Differences in the Perception of Seriousness, Motives, and Punishment. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 29(3), 399–415.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986213496378>

Eddy, K., Lipka, M., Matsa, K. E., Forman-Katz, N., Naseer, S., St Aubin, C., & Shearer, E. (2024). *Americans' Experiences With Local Crime News*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/08/29/americans-experiences-with-local-crime-news/>

Eisenman, R. (2010). Creativity and Crime: How Criminals Use Creativity to Succeed. In D. H. Cropley, A. J. Cropley, J. C. Kaufman, & M. A. Runco (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Creativity* (1st ed., pp. 204–217). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511761225.011>

Finkelstein, R., & Bastounis, M. (2010). The effect of the deliberation process and jurors' prior legal knowledge on the sentence: The role of psychological expertise and crime scene photo. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 28(3), 426–441. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.914>

Fino, E., Popușoi, S. A., Holman, A. C., Bajcsi, N., & Papageorgiou, K. A. (2025). "Crime and punishment": The effect of antagonistic personality traits on punitive attitudes and offender dehumanization. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 243, 113233.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2025.113233>

Forsberg, L., & Douglas, T. (2022). What is Criminal Rehabilitation? *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 16(1), 103–126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11572-020-09547-4>

Gamman, L., & Raein, M. (2010). Reviewing the art of crime: What, if anything, do criminals and Artists/Designers have in common? In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511761225.009>

Gill, P., Horgan, J., Hunter, S. T., & D. Cushenbery, L. (2013). Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organizations. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 47(2), 125–151. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.28>

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral Foundations Theory. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 47, pp. 55–130). Elsevier.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407236-7.00002-4>

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(5), 1029–1046.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141>

Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 366–385.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021847>

Gramlich, J. (2024). *Crime in the U.S.: Key questions answered*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/24/what-the-data-says-about-crime-in-the-us/>

Hester, N., Payne, B. K., & Gray, K. (2020). Promiscuous condemnation: People assume ambiguous actions are immoral. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 86, 103910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103910>

Hoyt, C. L., d'Almeida, A., Forsyth, R. B., & Burnette, J. L. (2024). Mindsets of criminality: Predicting punitive and rehabilitative attitudes. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 30(9), 1087–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2022.2154352>

Jonson, C. L., Butler, L. C., & Cullen, F. T. (2024). Public Support for a New Correctional Era: Attitudes Towards Punishment, Rehabilitation and Reform in America. In L. A. Craig, L. Dixon, & T. A. Gannon (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of What Works in Correctional Rehabilitation* (1st ed., pp. 13–25). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119893073.ch2>

Jørgensen, Ø., & Nilsson, A. (2026). Why should we punish and how? The role of moral intuitions and personal worldviews for punitiveness and sentencing preferences. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 32(4), 603–631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2024.2381673>

Kääriäinen, J. (2019). Knowledge, punitive attitudes and punitive gap: Finnish findings. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 25(4), 409–425. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-018-9384-3>

Kapoor, H., & Kaufman, J. C. (2022). The evil within: The AMORAL model of dark creativity. *Theory and Psychology*, (Sec 8). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221074326>

Kapoor, H., Mahadeshwar, H., Rezaei, S., Reiter-Palmon, R., & Kaufman, J. C. (2025). The Ties That Bind: Low Morals, High Deception, and Dark Creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 37(3), 452–471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2024.2306447>

Kapoor, H., & Puthillam, A. (2024). The Crisis of Misinformation and Dark Creativity. In Z. Ivcevic, R. Reiter-Palmon, M. Tang, & M. G. Grohman (Eds.), *Crises, Creativity and Innovation* (pp. 179–203). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-61782-9_9

Kapoor, H., Rezaei, S., Thakur, A., Roy, T., Perchtold-Stefan, C. M., & Kaufman, J. C. (2026). Development and Behavioral Validation of the Dark Creativity Deception Battery (DCDB). *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 60(2), e70122. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.70122>

Kaufman, J. C., & Baer, J. (2004). Sure, I'm Creative—But Not in Mathematics!: Self-Reported Creativity in Diverse Domains. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 22(2), 143–155. <https://doi.org/10.2190/26HQ-VHE8-GTLN-BJMM>

- Köber, G., Oberwittler, D., & Wickes, R. (2022). Old age and fear of crime: Cross-national evidence for a decreased impact of neighbourhood disadvantage in older age. *Ageing and Society*, 42(7), 1629–1658. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20001683>
- Lebuda, I., Karwowski, M., Galang, A. J. R., Szumski, G., & Firkowska-Mankiewicz, A. (2021). Personality predictors of creative achievement and lawbreaking behavior. *Current Psychology*, 40(8), 3629–3638. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12144-019-00306-W>
- Logan, M. K., Damadzic, A., Medeiros, K., Ligon, G. S., & Derrick, D.C. (2023). Constraints to malevolent innovation in terrorist attacks. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 17(1), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000385>
- Logan, M. K., Ligon, G. S., & Derrick, D.C. (2020). Measuring Tactical Innovation in Terrorist Attacks. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 54(4), 926–939. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.420>
- Paulhus, D. L., Buckels, E. E., Trapnell, P. D., & Jones, D. N. (2021). Screening for Dark Personalities: The Short Dark Tetrad (SD4). *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 37(3), 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1015-5759/a000602>
- Perchtold-Stefan, C., Rominger, C., Ceh, S., Sattler, K., Veit, S., & Fink, A. (2026). Out of the dark—Psychological perspectives on people’s fascination with true crime. *British Journal of Psychology*, 117(3), 880–909. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.70038>
- Piquero, A. R., Cullen, F. T., Unnever, J. D., Piquero, N. L., & Gordon, J. A. (2010). Never too late: Public optimism about juvenile rehabilitation. *Punishment & Society*, 12(2), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474509357379>
- Piquero, A. R., Piquero, N. L., Gertz, M., Bratton, J., & Loughran, T. A. (2012). Sometimes Ignorance is Bliss: Investigating Citizen Perceptions of the Certainty and Severity of Punishment. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 37(4), 630–646. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-011-9145-z>
- Rader, N. E., Cossman, J. S., & Porter, J. R. (2012). Fear of crime and vulnerability: Using a national sample of Americans to examine two competing paradigms. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(2), 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2012.02.003>
- Roberts, S. C., Vakirtzis, A., Kristjánsdóttir, L., & Havlíček, J. (2013). Who Punishes? Personality Traits Predict Individual Variation in Punitive Sentiment. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 11(1), 186–200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470491301100117>
- Rodríguez, G., & Blanco, S. (2016). Contrast effect on the perception of the severity of a criminal offence. *Anuario de Psicología Jurídica*, 26(1), 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apj.2016.02.001>

- RStudio Team. (2023). *RStudio: Integrated Development for R*. RStudio, PBC, Boston, MA.
<http://www.rstudio.com/>.
- Runco, M. A., & Jaeger, G. J. (2012). The Standard Definition of Creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 24(1), 92–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2012.650092>
- Russo, S., Roccato, M., & Vieno, A. (2013). Criminal Victimization and Crime Risk Perception: A Multilevel Longitudinal Study. *Social Indicators Research*, 112(3), 535–548.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-012-0050-8>
- Schafer, J. A., Huebner, B. M., & Bynum, T. S. (2006). Fear of crime and criminal victimization: Gender-based contrasts. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34(3), 285–301.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2006.03.003>
- Silver, J. R. (2017). Moral Foundations, Intuitions of Justice, and the Intricacies of Punitive Sentiment. *Law & Society Review*, 51(2), 413–450. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12264>
- Silver, J. R. (2020). Binding Morality and Perceived Harm as Sources of Moral Regulation Law Support Among Political and Religious Conservatives. *Law & Society Review*, 54(3), 680–719.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12487>
- Silver, J. R., & Silver, E. (2017). Why are conservatives more punitive than liberals? A moral foundations approach. *Law and Human Behavior*, 41(3), 258–272. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000232>
- Simonsohn, U. (2015). Small Telescopes: Detectability and the Evaluation of Replication Results. *Psychological Science*, 26(5), 559–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614567341>
- Simpson, S. S., Galvin, M. A., Loughran, T. A., & Cohen, M. A. (2023). Perceptions of White-Collar Crime Seriousness: Unpacking and Translating Attitudes into Policy Preferences. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 60(5), 582–622. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224278221092094>
- Sotirovic, M. (2001). Affective and Cognitive Processes As Mediators of Media Influences on Crime-Policy Preferences. *Mass Communication and Society*, 4(3), 311–329.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_04
- Van De Weetering, J., Weinrath, M., & Kohm, S. (2024). Does Use of Generic Depictions or Scenarios Matter in Perceptions of Crime Seriousness? An Empirical Test. *Criminal Justice Review*, 07340168241285434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07340168241285434>
- Vaughan, T. J., Bell Holleran, L., & Silver, J. R. (2019). Applying Moral Foundations Theory to the Explanation of Capital Jurors' Sentencing Decisions. *Justice Quarterly*, 36(7), 1176–1205.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2018.1537400>

Vogel, B. L., & Meeker, J. W. (2001). Perceptions of crime seriousness in eight African-American communities: The influence of individual, environmental, and crime-based factors. *Justice Quarterly*, 18(2), 301–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820100094911>

Zhao, S., Yi, L., & Shen, Y. X. (2025). The moral dark side of entrepreneurial leadership: How it leads to employee creative unethicity. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, 34(4), 1328–1340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12713>

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	23.45	8.53										
Gender	1.56	0.5	–0.06									
Education	2.99	1.23	.63**	–0.02								
SES	6.45	1.65	.11**	–0.06	.13**							
Psychopathy	15.87	6.02	.29**	–.16*	.35**	.18**						
Machiavellianism	24.19	4.77	.17**	–.13*	.18**	0.07	.40**					
Narcissism	21.66	5.17	.13**	–.08*	.18**	.25**	.51**	.51**				
Sadism	18.47	5.88	0.07	–.30*	0.05	.14**	.66**	.42**	.42**			
Moral Foundation-Care	21.63	5.15	–0.01	.22**	0.02	–0.08	–.10*	.17**	0.04	–.10*		
Moral Foundation-												

n-Fair	20.84	5	0.04	.13**	0.08	-0.07	-0.06	.19**	0.06	-0.02	.73**	
Moral Foundation-Loyalty	17.18	5.51	.24**	-.11*	.22**	.10*	.31**	.28**	.29**	.18**	.39**	.40**
Moral Foundation-Authority	18.57	5.02	.11**	-0.03	0.02	0.06	.14**	.24**	.23**	.15**	.41**	.42**
Moral Foundation-Purity	18.03	5.45	.14**	0	.10**	0.02	.14**	.24**	.21**	.12**	.49**	.46**
Individualizing Moral Foundations	42.47	9.45	0.01	.19**	0.05	-.08*	-.09*	.20**	0.05	-0.07	.93**	.93**
Binding Moral Foundations	53.78	14.07	.19**	-0.06	.13**	0.07	.23**	.29**	.28**	.17**	.49**	.48**
Creative Self-Efficacy	24.27	5.13	0.07	0.04	.18**	.10**	0.05	.14**	.31**	-0.04	.25**	.25**
Perceived Legal Knowledge	5.84	2.04	.19**	-.08*	.27**	.25**	.35**	.14**	.33**	.21**	-0.03	0.02
Severity	7.12	1.46	.12**	-.09*	.12**	0.07	0.03	.08*	.15**	-0.01	.15**	.17**

fulne ss	6.6	1.53	.22**	-.11* *	.22**	.17**	.13**	0.07	.20**	0.04	.10**	.15**
Sente ncing Reco mme ndati ons	5.98	1.61	0.01	-.13* *	-0.03	-0.06	-.13* *	.09*	-0.03	-0.03	.13**	.13**
Reha bilitat ion Reco mme ndati ons	4.28	1.83	.13**	-0.05	.19**	.10**	.11**	0.02	.10*	0.01	0.06	.11**

Table 1 (Continued)

Variabl e	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Moral Found ation- Author ity	.66**									
Moral Found ation- Purity	.66**	.68**								
Individ ualizin g Moral Found ations	.42**	.44**	.51**							
Bindin g Moral Found ations	.88**	.88**	.89**	.52**						
Creativ e Self- Efficac y	.15**	.12**	.14**	.27**	.16**					

Legal Knowledge	.24**	.15**	.18**	0	.21**	.15**				
Severity	.29**	.27**	.26**	.17**	.31**	.12**	.25**			
Harmfulness	.28**	.22**	.20**	.13**	.27**	.11**	.31**	.73**		
Sentencing Recommendations	0.07	.12**	.10**	.14**	.11**	0.07	0	.41**	.25**	
Rehabilitation Recommendations	.19**	.11**	.10**	.09*	.15**	.10**	.15**	.41**	.39**	.35**

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively

SES = Socioeconomic status.

Gender was coded as men = 1, women = 2.

Table 2. Repeated-Measures ANOVAs of the outcome variables across moral valences.

Moral valence	Outcome Variables	F-value	Creative Crimes		Non-creative Crimes	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Ambiguous	Severity	25.55**	6.73	2.44	5.75	2.49
	Harm	22.26**	5.74	2.5	4.79	2.64
	Sentencing	7.86*	5.14	2.52	4.59	2.52
	Rehabilitation	3.29	4.02	3.18	3.59	2.88
Self-interested	Severity	14.7***	6.14	2.31	5.41	2.49
	Harm	8.95**	5.22	2.44	4.62	2.69
	Sentencing	14.2***	4.83	2.11	4.18	2.29
	Rehabilitation	4.6*	3.32	2.73	2.89	2.49
Sinful	Severity	3.7	7.52	2.06	7.2	2.17

	Harm	1.07	7.1	2.4	6.9	2.45
	Sentencing	0.14	6.1	2.52	6.17	2.43
	Rehabilitation	0.74	4.62	2.9	4.42	2.83
Evil	Severity	2.45	9.19	1.42	8.99	1.86
	Harm	0.06	9.2	1.43	9.18	1.64
	Sentencing	0.55	8.51	2.27	8.37	2.52
	Rehabilitation	1.4	5.57	2.89	5.84	2.88

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3a. Multivariate effect of moral valence on crime evaluations.

Variable	Pillai's Trace	F-value
Moral Valence	0.542	106.94***
Severity	-	389.2***
Harm	-	599.6***
Sentencing	-	483.2***
Rehabilitation	-	125.1***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3b. Pairwise comparisons with mean differences of moral valence categories across the outcome variables.

Comparison	Severity	Harmfulness	Sentencing Recommendations	Rehabilitation Recommendations
Evil - Sinful	1.73***	2.19***	2.31***	1.18***
Evil - Self-Interested	3.33***	4.27***	3.94***	2.6***
Evil - Ambiguous	2.86***	3.92***	3.58***	1.89***
Sinful - Self-Interested	1.6***	2.08***	1.64***	1.42***
Sinful - Ambiguous	1.12***	1.74***	1.27***	0.71***
Ambiguous - Self-Interested	0.48***	0.35**	0.37**	0.71***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Hierarchical Linear Mixed-Effects Regression Models Predicting Severity Ratings of the Crimes.

Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.01
Gender	-0.09*	-0.12**	-0.12**	-0.12**
Education	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02
Psychopathy		-0.05	-0.06*	-0.07*
Machiavellianism		-0.02	-0.06*	-0.01
Narcissism		0.08**	0.05	0.05
Sadism		-0.05	-0.04	-0.04
Individualizing Moral Foundations		0.02	0.03	0.02
Binding Moral Foundations		0.16***	0.15***	0.14***
Creative Self-Efficacy			0.01	0.01
Perceived Legal Knowledge			0.11***	0.11***
Creativity				-0.1
Moral Valence-Sinful				-0.68***
Moral Valence-Self-interested				-1.21***
Moral Valence-Ambiguous				-0.98***
Creativity*Sinful				0.01
Creativity*Self-interested				-0.17
Creativity*Ambiguous				-0.28**
Conditional R-squared	0.1	0.1	0.11	0.46
Marginal R-squared	0.01	0.04	0.05	0.32

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5. Hierarchical Linear Mixed-Effects Regression Models Predicting Harmfulness Ratings of the Crimes.

Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	0.06*	0.05*	0.05	0.05*
Gender	-0.10*	-0.13**	-0.12**	-0.13**
Education	0.07**	0.06*	0.04	0.04
SES	0.07***	0.06**	0.04*	0.04*
Psychopathy		-0.002	-0.02	-0.02
Machiavellianism		-0.05*	-0.04	-0.04
Narcissism		0.08**	0.07*	0.06*
Sadism		-0.04	-0.04	-0.03
Individualizing Moral Foundations		0.04	0.04	0.04
Binding Moral Foundations		0.09***	0.08**	0.08**
Creative Self-Efficacy			-0.01	-0.01
Perceived Legal Knowledge			0.11***	0.11***
Creativity				-0.03
Moral Valence-Sinful				-0.76***
Moral Valence-Self-interested				-1.40***
Moral Valence-Ambiguous				-1.21***
Creativity*Sinful				-0.01
Creativity*Self-interested				-0.17*
Creativity*Ambiguous				-0.30***
Conditional R-squared	0.04	0.04	-	0.51
Marginal R-squared	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.41

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < 0.001

Conditional R-squared for model 3 was NA because random effect variance between participants was negligible.

Table 6. Hierarchical Linear Mixed-Effects Regression Models Predicting Sentencing recommendations of the crimes.

Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Gender	-0.15***	-0.18***	-0.18***	-0.18***
Psychopathy		-0.12***	-0.13***	-0.13***
Machiavellianism		0.07*	0.06*	0.06*
Narcissism		-0.01	-0.03	-0.03
Sadism		0.01	0.02	0.02
Individualizing Moral Foundations		0.05	0.05	0.05
Binding Moral Foundations		0.04	0.05	0.05
Creative Self-Efficacy			0.03	0.03
Perceived Legal Knowledge			0.02	0.02
Creativity				-0.01
Moral Valence-Sinful				-0.82***
Moral Valence-Self-interested				-1.27***
Moral Valence-Ambiguous				-1.16***
Creativity*Sinful				0.03
Creativity*Self-interested				-0.22*
Creativity*Ambiguous				-0.19*
Conditional R-squared	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.5
Marginal R-squared	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.32

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 7. Hierarchical Linear Mixed-Effects Regression Models Predicting Rehabilitation Recommendations for Crimes.

Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	0.01	0	-0.01	-0.01
Education	0.10***	0.09**	0.08*	0.08*
SES	0.05*	0.04	0.04	0.04
Psychopathy		0.05	0.04	0.05
Machiavellianism		-0.05	-0.05	-0.05
Narcissism		0.03	0.01	0.01
Sadism		-0.04	-0.04	-0.04
Individualizing Moral Foundations		0.03	0.03	0.03
Binding Moral Foundations		0.06*	0.06*	0.06*
Creative Self-Efficacy			0.03	0.03
Perceived Legal Knowledge			0.04	0.04
Creativity				0.1
Moral Valence-Sinful				-0.30***
Moral Valence-Self-interested				-0.74***
Moral Valence-Ambiguous				-0.52***
Creativity*Sinful				-0.19
Creativity*Self-interested				-0.24*
Creativity*Ambiguous				-0.22*
Conditional R-squared	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.3
Marginal R-squared	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.13

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 8. Regression coefficients for the model predicting effect of perceived legal knowledge on sentencing decisions.

Variable	Std. Coefficient
Perceived Legal Knowledge	-0.11**
Moral Valence- Sinful	-0.81***
Moral Valence- Self-interested	-1.38***
Moral Valence- Ambiguous	-1.25***
Perceived Legal Knowledge*Sinful	0.14***
Perceived Legal Knowledge*Self-interested	0.19***
Perceived Legal Knowledge*Ambiguous	0.09*
Conditional R-squared	0.49
Marginal R-squared	0.3

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 9. Regression coefficients Linear Mixed-Effects Regression Predicting Severity, Harmfulness, Sentencing, and Rehabilitation Judgments for cross-cultural comparison.

Variable	Severity	Harmfulness	Sentencing	Rehabilitation
Age	0.01	0.04	0.03	-0.01
Gender	-0.1*	-0.12**	-0.18***	-0.06
Education	0	0	0.01	0.09*
SES	0.01	0.05*	-0.02	0.05
Country of Origin	-0.02	-0.07*	0.03	0
Psychopathy	-0.07	-0.03	-0.13***	0.03
Machiavellianism	-0.03	-0.06*	0.06*	-0.04
Narcissism	0.05	0.07*	-0.04	0.01
Sadism	-0.03	-0.02	0.03	-0.03
Individualizing Moral Foundations	0.04	0.05	0.06*	0.05
Binding Moral Foundations	0.15***	0.08**	0.04	0.05
Creative Self-Efficacy	0.01	0	0.03	0.02
Perceived Legal Knowledge	0.12***	0.1***	0.03	0.04

Creativity	-0.08	-0.01	0	0.09
Moral Valence-Sinful	-0.68***	-0.74***	-0.83***	-0.31***
Moral Valence-Self-interested	-1.2***	-1.38***	-1.23***	-0.73***
Moral Valence-Ambiguous	-0.97***	-1.18***	-1.13***	-0.52***
Creativity*Sinful	0	-0.02	0.05	-0.18
Creativity*Self-interested	-0.2*	-0.2*	-0.27**	-0.24*
Creativity*Ambiguous	-0.28**	-0.33***	-0.21*	-0.21*
Conditional R-squared	0.46	0.51	0.49	0.3
Marginal R-squared	0.32	0.41	0.32	0.13

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < 0.001$

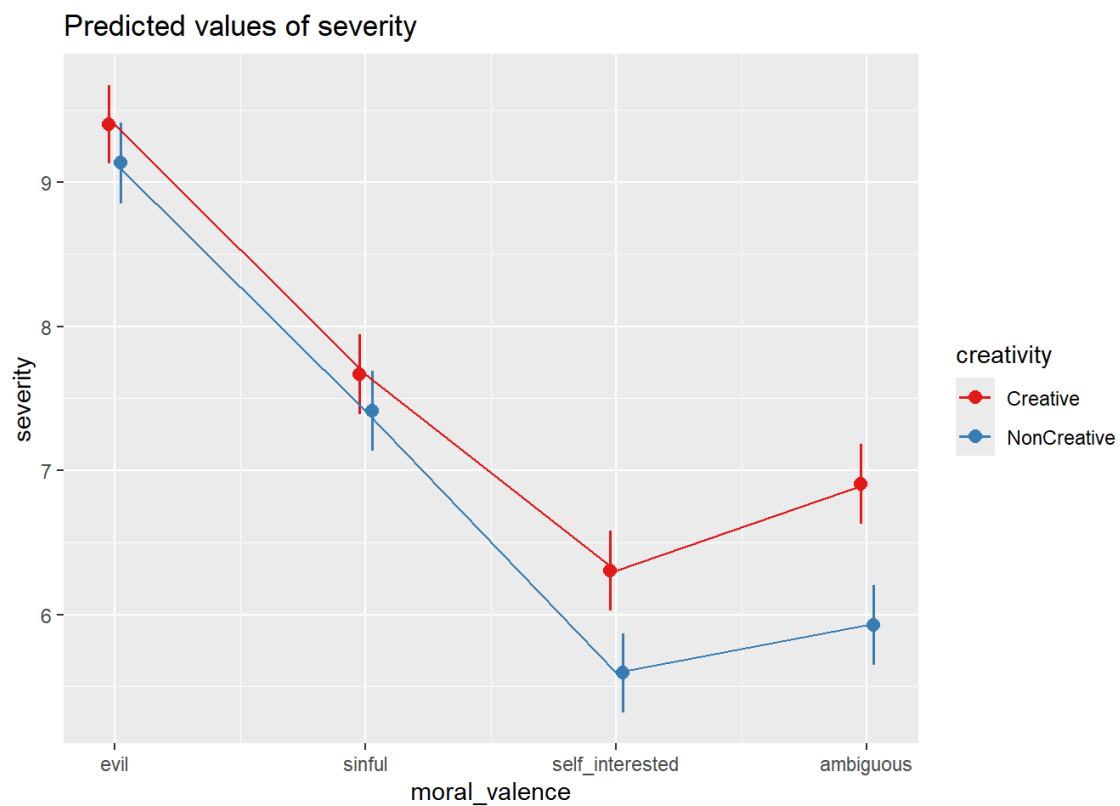


Figure 1. Interaction plot for mixed-methods models predicting the severity of crimes for creative and non-creative crimes across the four moral valences.

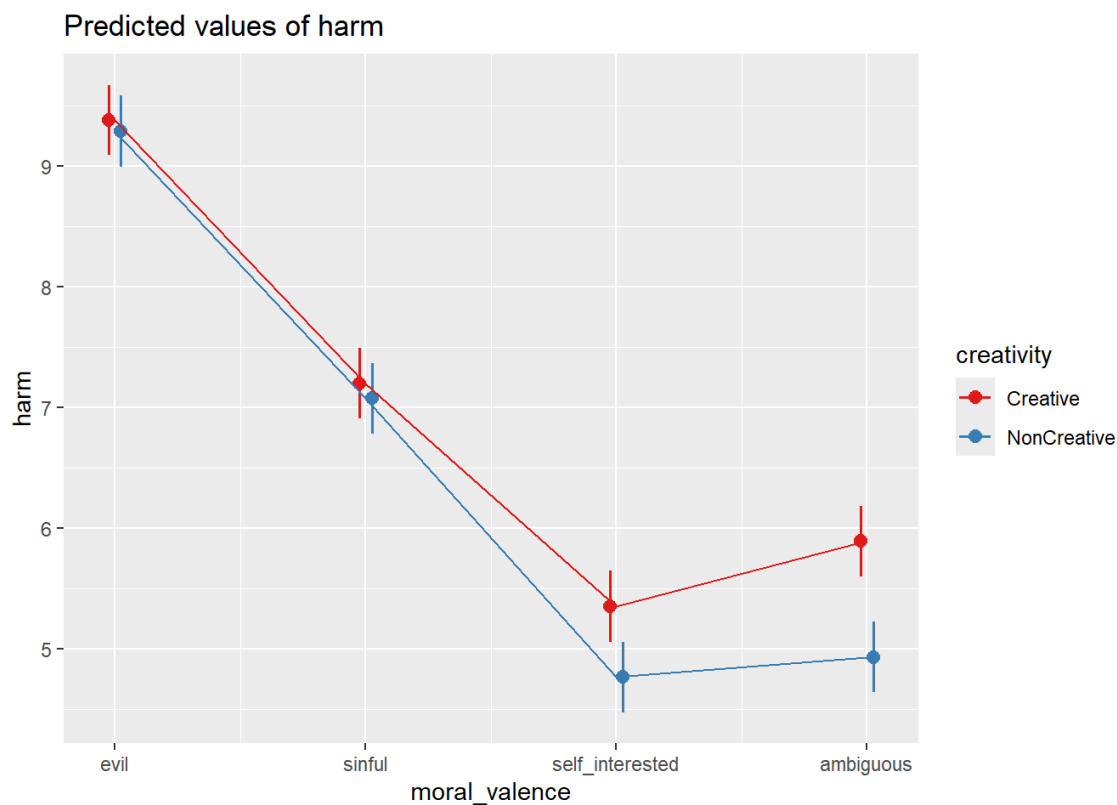


Figure 2. Interaction plot for mixed-methods models predicting the harmfulness of crimes for creative and non-creative crimes across the four moral valences.

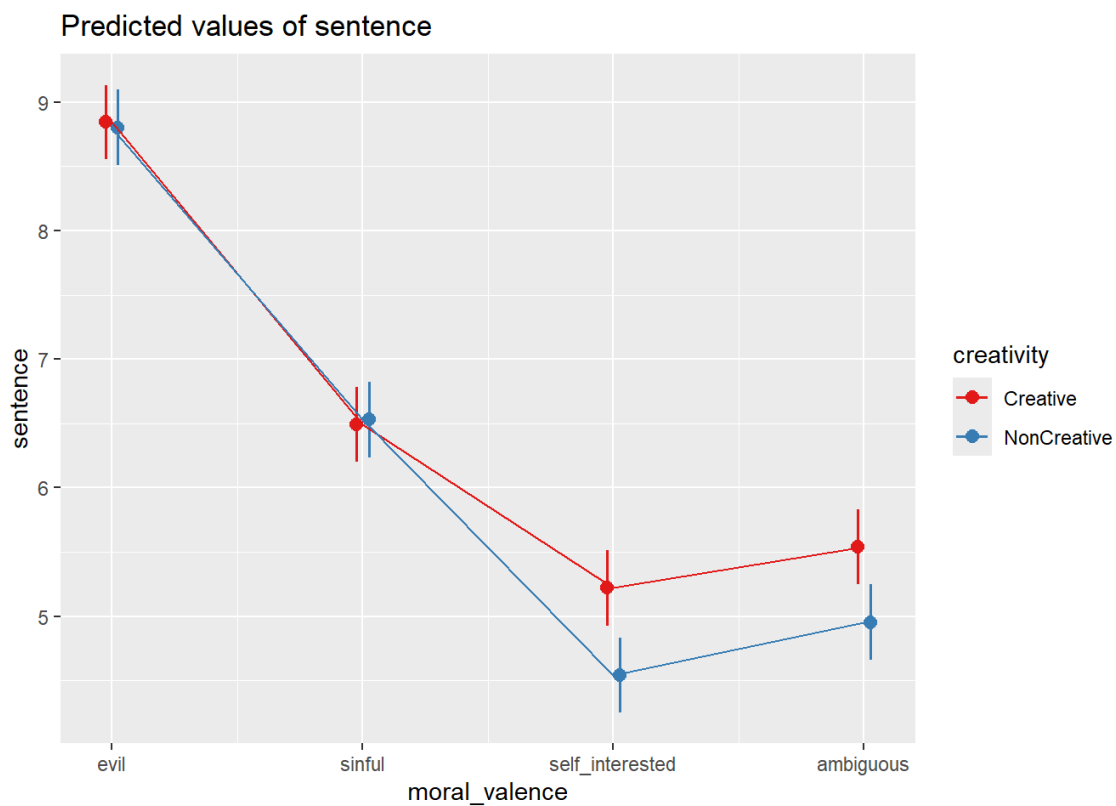


Figure 3. Interaction plot for mixed-methods models predicting the sentencing recommendations for creative and non-creative crimes across the four moral valences.

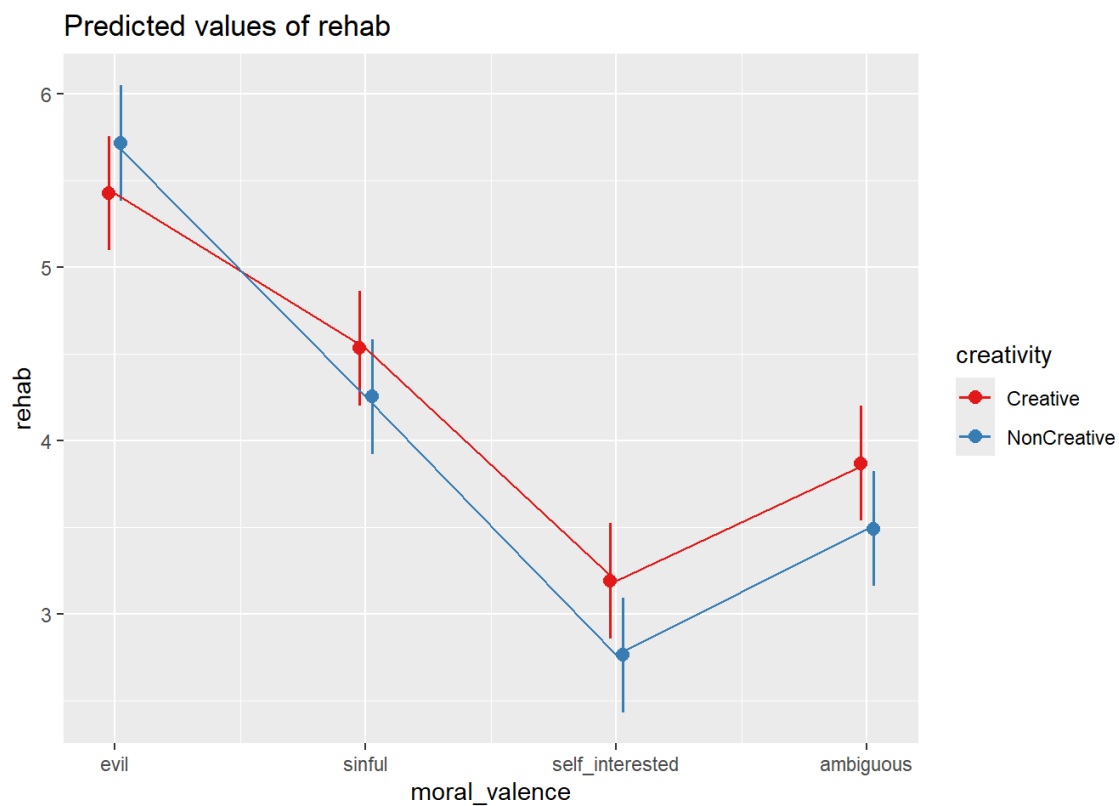


Figure 4. Interaction plot for mixed-methods models predicting the rehabilitation recommendations for creative and non-creative crimes across the four moral valences.

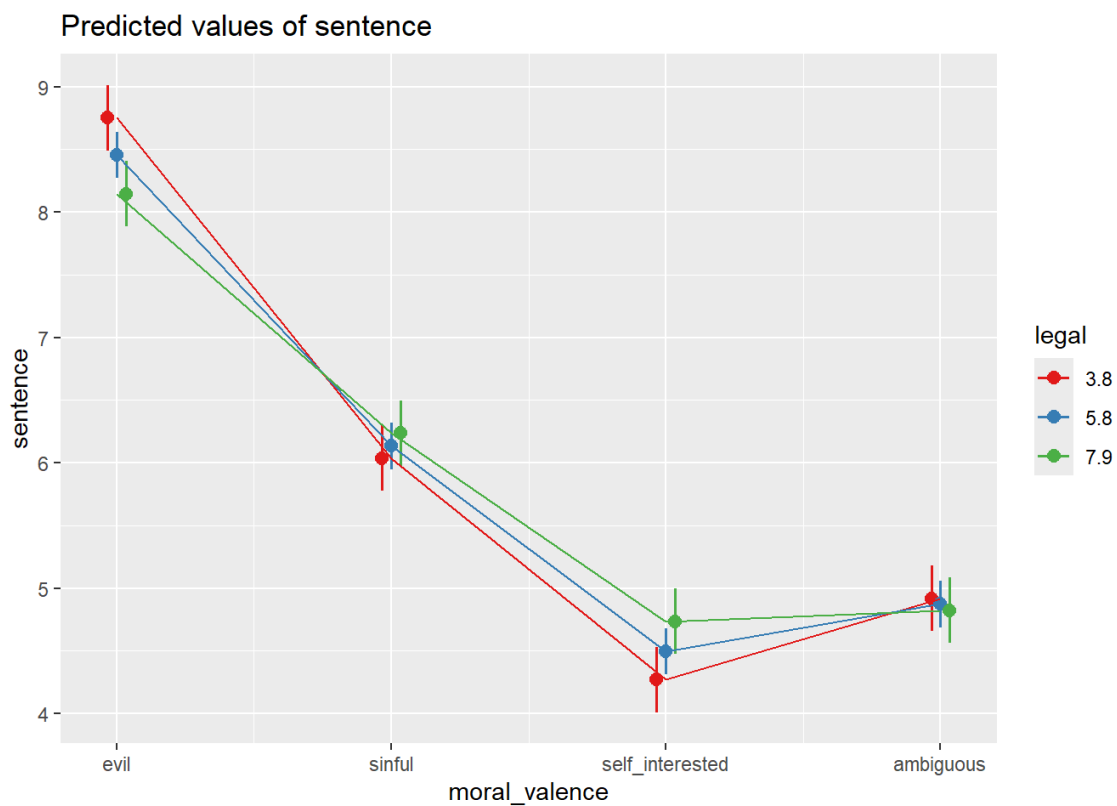


Figure 5. Interaction plot for sentencing recommendation prediction based on perceived legal knowledge of individuals across the four moral valences.

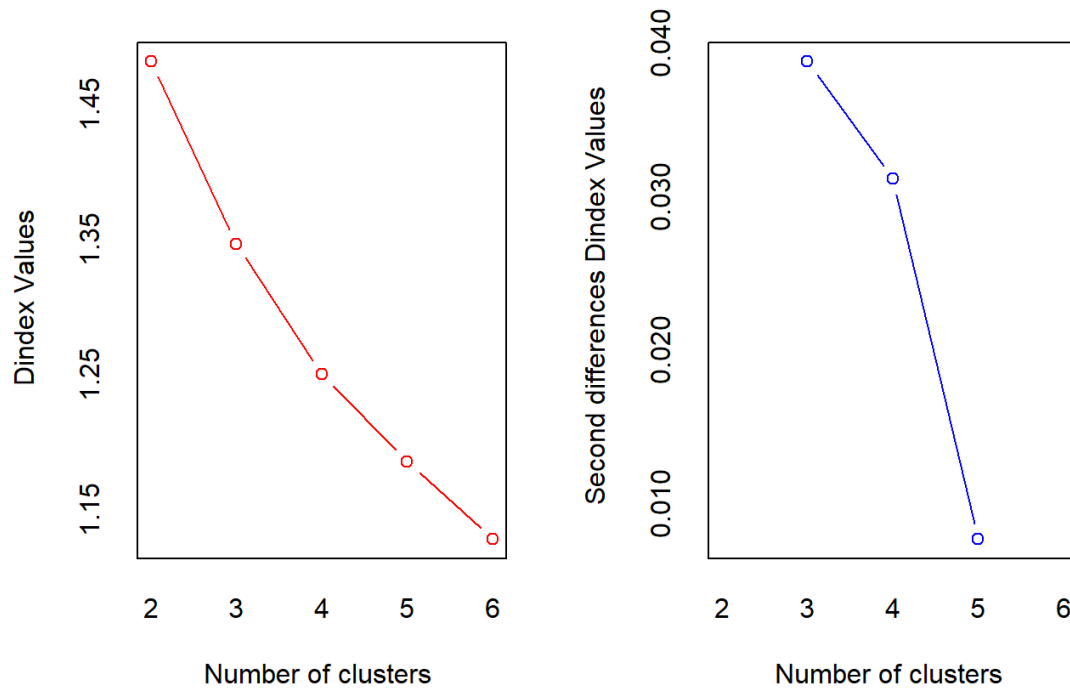


Figure 6a. The Hubert Index graphical method to determine the optimal number of clusters. The Hubert index is a graphical method of determining the number of clusters. In the plot of the Hubert index, we seek a significant knee that corresponds to a significant increase in the value of the measure, i.e the significant peak in the Hubert index second-differences plot.

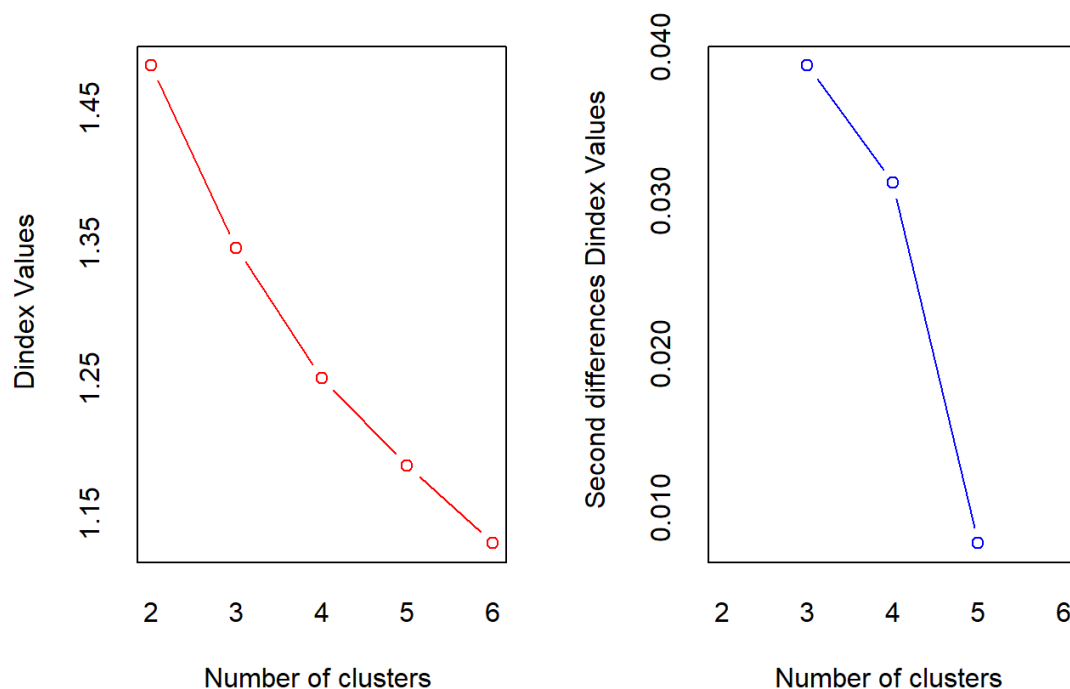


Figure 6b. D index graphical method to determine the number of clusters. The D index is a graphical method of determining the number of clusters. In the plot of the D index, we seek a significant knee (the significant peak in the D-index second-differences plot) that corresponds to a significant increase in the value of the measure.

Based on all the indices and majority rule, the best numbers of clusters was identified to be 2.

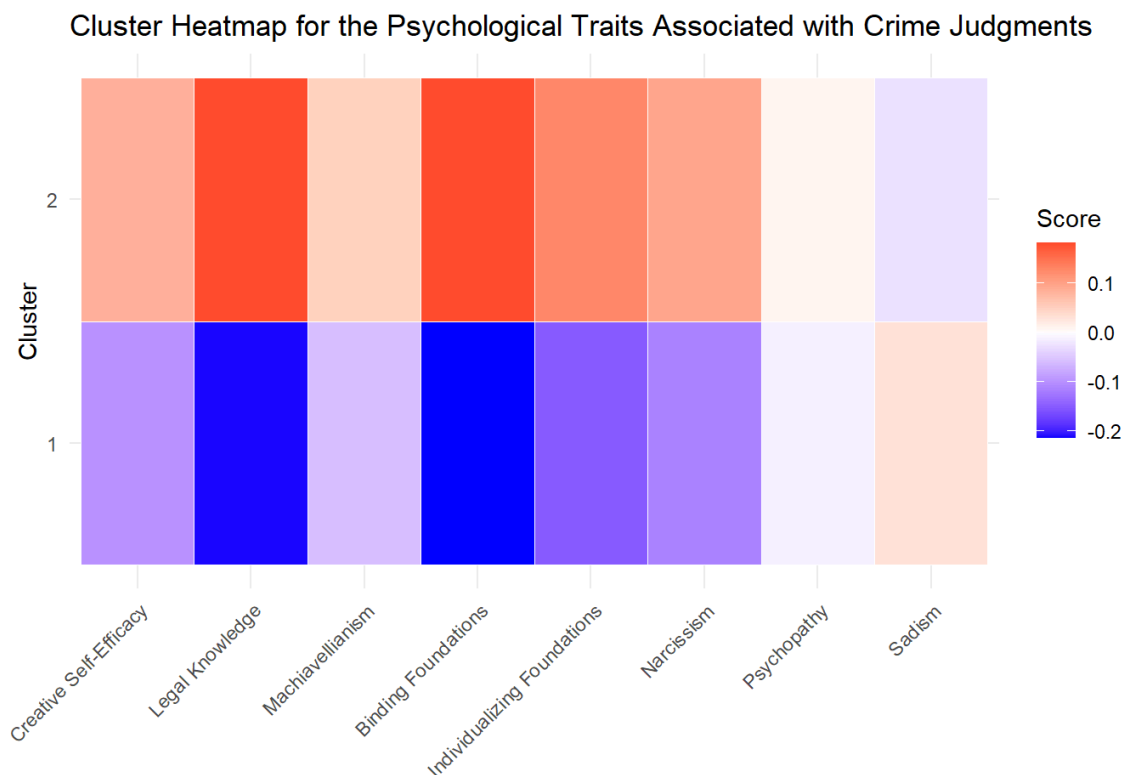


Figure 7. Heatmap of standardized individual-difference profiles across crime perception clusters.

Notes

¹ For H3-H6, we have only included the sociodemographic variables that were found to be significant with the dependent measures in the correlation analysis. The sociodemographics include: age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status.

² For H3-H6 and for the RQ1 and RQ2, “legal knowledge” was changed to “perceived legal knowledge” to reflect the subjective nature of the measure.

³ Full form measures can be found on OSF: https://osf.io/ub8vs/overview?view_only=fe3f60716b134728b2325b0edc5e3f01

⁴ In our study, perceived legal knowledge was measured through self-report, rather than structured assessments of case law, procedural knowledge, or statutory awareness. While prior work (Erickson et al., 2013; Molotova et al., 2020; Truelove et al., 2021) has used detailed legal knowledge scales, these may not be directly applicable as our study focuses on subjective perceptions of legal awareness rather than factual accuracy.

⁵ The process used for creating the crime scenarios along with the scenarios can be found in the document uploaded on OSF: https://osf.io/ub8vs/overview?view_only=fe3f60716b134728b2325b0edc5e3f01

⁶ Figures associated with the cross-cultural analysis can be found in the Supplementary Figures document included along with the LifeCycle Journal outcome report submission.

Declarations

Ethics

This study was approved by the ethics committee at Monk Prayogshala in May 2025 (#178-025), and at the University of Connecticut in September 2025 (#X25-0281).

Competing Interests

None.

Funding

This project was funded by Monk Prayogshala; no external grant/funding was received for this project.

Author Contributions

Hansika Kapoor: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Apoorva Thakur: Formal Analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Sarah Rezaei: Conceptualization, Software, Writing – review & editing. James C. Kaufman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.