

## BOOK REVIEW

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### A Review of *Inside the Criminal Mind*

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**REFERENCE:** Samenow, S. E., *Inside the Criminal Mind*, Times Books, Three Park Ave., New York, NY, 1984, 271 pp., \$15.50.

This book presents an interesting approach to working with criminals but unfortunately loses much by severe overstatement and lack of any precise delineation of the population being described. It does give a description of the thinking patterns of many criminals and it does present a cognitive type of therapy which, however, it does not acknowledge as such. The author's treatment, as well as that of Yochelson with whom he had previously collaborated, involves direct forceful confrontation to the criminal of his thinking patterns, yet at the same time maintains polite respect for him. The book is rich in pertinent clinical material, and presents an approach that encourages the criminal to take responsibility for his actions without blaming others for his behavior. As such, it is a meaningful contribution.

Unfortunately, however, there are many sensationalized extreme statements that may have useful shock value in a therapeutic context with certain patients but, that severely detract from the book's value. Such assertions in a serious professional work seem either to represent unusual imprecise definitions or an attempt to achieve publicity for views which fit into popular stereotypes about criminals but which are contrary to the studies of most others in the field. Examples of this general problem with the book include the statement by the author that "*all* criminals are rational and that crime is never caused by mental illness." The author further states that in 13 years, Yochelson and he never found *any* criminals whom they evaluated to be insane. He also states that drug use, in his experience, *never* leads to crime but that crime always comes first. Moreover, he writes that he has *never* met a prisoner who went "legitimate" when he received proper career training.

Such statements indicate a strange clinical perspective or a definition of "criminal" that includes only the most hardened antisocial personality. The author never clarifies what he means. His extreme statements ignore the many relevant studies that show that there are large numbers of people in jails and prisons who are mentally ill. Also ignored are people with mental illnesses who are arrested for even minor misdemeanors. Since these distinctions are not carefully delineated, the book encourages misunderstandings and misconceptions in its readers. It implies that anyone who is arrested is not mentally ill, and that mental illness never results in crime. It is unclear whether the author actually intends such strange statements, or whether the intent is different and more responsible. It is never clarified. The result is a serious departure from good scientific procedure.

Also evident are extreme statements that imply that the approach in this book is the only

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valid one and that it represents a revolutionary different type of therapy totally distinct from all others. It ignores its similarities to other treatments such as cognitive therapy and presents Yochelson in idealized terms as the developer of a major innovation in treatment.

At times the book appears to reflect the frustration and disappointments that result from treating patients who are very resistant without being aware of their resistance, the discouragement which comes when a very ill patient regresses, or the anger at a patient who returns to crime. The author sets up a straw man to attack with his distorted presentations of other treatments. Although it is true that criminals can use insights defensively to rationalize their behavior, and that some patients in prison only pretend to change as a result of insight, that still does not prove that all psychodynamic insight therapy is counterproductive, even with criminals. It shows only that therapists should be on guard for such resistance by prisoners as well as with other noncriminal patients. Although Samenow attempts to change the thinking patterns of criminals and tries to enable them not to think criminal thoughts or even to feel angry, there are, in my experience, patients with personality disorder who make much more progress by uncovering feelings and by learning to distinguish between thought and action rather than by suppression of feelings.

The author also shows confusion regarding the philosophical issues of free will and determinism. Although it is true that it is therapeutic, when working with any patient, criminal or otherwise, to emphasize to him that he has freedom of choice and the ability to change, that does not negate the fact that there are causes for behavior. Insight into such causes can often be therapeutic for patients and is certainly very important for mental health professionals as well as for policy makers. Such insights are not always merely in the service of resistance.

The book fosters the misconception that everyone who commits a crime and is in prison is a hardened criminal. It does not distinguish between hardened antisocial personalities and those people who have committed crimes but who nevertheless are plagued with all sorts of mental illnesses and problems. By ignoring the whole issue of psychiatric diagnosis, I believe that the author has done a major disservice to the field. The book encourages misconceptions about the diversity of people in prisons, implying that all criminals are alike. It even encourages a nihilistic approach to the treatment of people in prison who are not hardened criminals at a time when many people are grasping at excuses that will support their attempts to do less and less. Although the author expresses hope for the treatment of criminals, his book is likely to be accepted by many people who claim that such treatment is useless. As such, his view may be popular in some circles for reasons which are contrary at least to the expressed intent of the author. It can encourage a lack of treatment of people in the criminal justice system who have very treatable mental illnesses and are not hardened antisocial personalities.

Unfortunately, I cannot recommend this book because it is not a balanced contribution to the field. It is too replete with extreme statements without qualifications or definitions and as such is contrary to the experiences of most others in the field, as well as being misleading. Its narrow perspective glosses over the enormous complexity of the issues. However, the somewhat redeeming feature of the book is a description of an interesting cognitive therapy approach which is likely to have validity for some criminal patients and some therapists. There also are some well written clinical case reports and a good description of the thinking processes of some criminals. This book could have been a meaningful constructive contribution if it had been a more balanced and less sensationalized work. It might have clarified that only hardened antisocial personalities were being described, and might have tried to distinguish them from people with mental illnesses, assuming the possibility that the author truly was not referring to all people in jail and prisons, but only to a subgroup. As presented, however, this book, much like the previous volumes by Yochelson and Samenow, relies much too heavily on broad, extreme, and exaggerated statements which probably confuse more than they clarify. It may achieve good publicity, but it is not good science.