

The Psychological Functioning of Recidivists

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Abstract:

This study aims to clarify the specificity of psychological functioning among recidivists by employing the clinical method. Adopting a clinical case study approach, the research utilized clinical interviews and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) as the primary projective tool, along with the analysis of projective stories. The objective was to identify internal conflicts, defense mechanisms, and the strength of the ego in coping with social and familial pressures.

The findings revealed a complex interplay between feelings of guilt, power dynamics, and the influence of family and societal expectations. Notably, defense mechanisms such as repression, sublimation, and rationalization emerged as key strategies for managing these pressures. Furthermore, the case demonstrated fluctuations in ego strength, oscillating between resilience and hesitation when faced with challenging situations. These results underscore the importance of addressing internal psychological conflicts and enhancing both family and social support within reintegration programs, as such measures are vital for reducing the risk of recidivism and promoting successful adaptation post-release.

Keywords: Psychological functioning, recidivists

Résumé

Cette étude vise à clarifier la spécificité du fonctionnement psychologique chez les récidivistes en adoptant la méthode clinique. En utilisant une approche d'étude de cas clinique, la recherche s'est appuyée sur des entretiens cliniques et le Test d'Aperception Thématique (TAT) comme principal outil projectif, ainsi que sur l'analyse des récits projectifs. L'objectif était d'identifier les conflits internes, les mécanismes de défense et la force du moi dans la gestion des pressions sociales et familiales.

Les résultats ont révélé une interaction complexe entre les sentiments de culpabilité, les dynamiques de pouvoir et l'influence des attentes familiales et sociétales. Notamment, des mécanismes de défense tels que la répression, la sublimation et la rationalisation sont apparus comme des stratégies clés pour gérer ces pressions. De plus, l'étude de cas a montré des fluctuations dans la force du moi, oscillant entre résilience et hésitation face à des situations difficiles. Ces résultats soulignent l'importance de traiter les conflits psychologiques internes et de renforcer le soutien familial et social dans les programmes de réinsertion, ces mesures étant essentielles pour réduire le risque de récidive et favoriser une adaptation réussie après la libération.

Mots-clés : fonctionnement psychologique, récidivistes

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1. Introduction:

The phenomenon of recidivism is one of the most prominent challenges facing Algerian society in recent years, as field studies indicate that the rates of crime recurrence among released individuals remain high despite efforts to reduce them. Additionally, (Lassoued, 2021) it has been reported that the recidivism rate among prisoners who benefited from amnesty or parole is high ; in one study, more than 61% of these individuals returned to crime, reflecting the magnitude of the challenge facing reintegration programs. **(Athamnia, 2024, p. 2)**

In the international context, recent studies have shown that psychological and neurological factors play a pivotal role in explaining recidivism. A review published in 2024 showed that psychological disorders, especially when combined with substance use disorders, significantly increase the likelihood of reoffending. The results indicated that individuals with dual disorders (such as schizophrenia and alcohol use disorder) are at a much higher risk of recidivism compared to others **(Romero-Martínez et al., 2023, p. 69)**

As indicated by the study of Aharoni et al. (2013), neural activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) during a self-control task among released offenders can predict the likelihood of re-arrest within four years of release. The results indicated that individuals who exhibited low activity in this area were more likely to reoffend compared to those with high activity, even after controlling for traditional risk factors. This study highlights the importance of neurobiological indicators as an additional tool to improve the accuracy of predicting the risk of recidivism in criminal behavior, opening new horizons for preventive and therapeutic interventions. **(Aharoni et al., 2013, p. 3)**

On the other hand, recent research has indicated that individuals who relapse into crime often use psychological defense mechanisms such as moral disengagement including justification, denial, and blaming others which contributes to the recurrence of criminal behavior despite their awareness of its consequences **(Navas et al. 2025)**. Recent systematic reviews confirm that dark personality traits, such as psychopathy and narcissism, when combined with moral disengagement, lead to a significant increase in the likelihood of recidivism **(Cen et al., 2025; Mullins et al., 2014)**

The current study gains its significance from its focus on integrating local evidence regarding recidivism in Algeria with the latest international findings that highlight the role of psychological factors and defense mechanisms in explaining the phenomenon. Unlike most previous studies that focused on social or legal aspects or relied solely on statistical analysis, this study also employs advanced projective tools such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which allows for the revelation of deep psychological dynamics and unconscious mechanisms that may not appear in quantitative measures .

In light of the above, and with the multitude of psychological and social factors that intersect in the experience of the ex-offender, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the psychological characteristics and internal dynamics that distinguish this group. Monitoring the tensions between feelings of guilt, the pressures of family and social expectations, and the search for adaptation or reintegration compels us to investigate the nature of the psychological functioning and defensive mechanisms that the ex-offender relies on in facing their daily challenges. And from here we pose the following questions :

1. What are the specific features of psychological functioning among recidivists ?
2. Which psychological and defense mechanisms are most prominent in individuals who reoffend ?

3. In what ways does ego strength manifest in recidivists when they encounter conflicts and pressures ?

2. Study objectives:

- Determining the specificity of *Psychological Functioning* among recidivists.
- Monitoring his most prominent psychological and defensive mechanisms.
- Evaluating the strength of the ego in facing conflicts and pressures

3. The importance of the study:

- Understanding internal psychological conflicts : The study allows for the revelation of the nature of internal conflicts experienced by the ex-offender, such as the tension between the desire for change and the pressures of the past or family, which helps in explaining the motivations for returning to criminal behavior.
- Identifying psychological and defensive mechanisms : The study contributes to identifying the most prominent defensive mechanisms used by the recidivist (such as repression, sublimation, justification), providing a basis for designing effective therapeutic interventions

4. Operational Definitions of the Study Variables:

▪ Psychological Functioning :

In this study, psychological functioning refers to the set of defense mechanisms and Coping strategies an individual uses to adapt to internal and external pressures, as Revealed by their responses on the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)

▪ Recidivism :

Recidivism is defined as the case when a person, after serving a sentence for a Crime, commits another crime and is convicted again

5. Literature Review

• Study by Brugués and Caparrós (2022):

Their study, entitled "Dysfunctional personality, Dark Triad and moral disengagement in incarcerated offenders: implications for recidivism and violence," aimed to analyze dysfunctional personality patterns, Dark Triad traits (psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism), and mechanisms of moral disengagement among incarcerated offenders, with a particular focus on their relationship with violence and recidivism.

The researchers adopted a quantitative approach, selecting a sample of 63 prisoners from two different correctional facilities. Standardized psychological instruments were used to assess dysfunctional personality traits, Dark Triad characteristics, and moral disengagement mechanisms, and the data were analyzed using binary logistic regression.

The results showed that offenders convicted of violent crimes exhibited higher levels of moral disengagement than non-violent offenders. Among the dysfunctional personality traits, antisocial and aggressive-sadistic tendencies were most strongly associated with moral disengagement. The statistical analysis further revealed that the main factors influencing recidivism were the use of violence in the committed crime, the presence of antisocial personality traits, and the employment of specific moral disengagement mechanisms, particularly advantageous comparison and dehumanization.

•Bazinet et al. (2022):

The study, titled "The contribution of psychopathic traits and substance use in the prediction of recidivism of sexual offenders," aimed to examine how psychopathic characteristics and substance use together predict the likelihood of reoffending among high-risk male sexual offenders.

Methodology:

The researchers adopted a retrospective design, analyzing data from the Regional Treatment

Center, Sex Offender Treatment Program (RTCSOTP). The sample consisted of incarcerated high-risk male sexual offenders who had completed treatment and were monitored for recidivism within five years of release.

Instruments:

- **Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R) to assess psychopathic traits.**
- **Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) to evaluate drug use and dependency.**
- **Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (MAST) to measure alcohol use and dependency.**

Results:

The findings showed that both PCL-R (psychopathy) and DAST (drug use) scores were significant predictors of sexual and violent recidivism within five years post-release. In contrast, MAST (alcohol use) scores did not significantly predict recidivism in this population. The study concluded that drug use, in combination with psychopathic traits, substantially increases the risk of reoffending among sexual offenders, highlighting the importance of addressing drug abuse in rehabilitation and risk management programs for this group.

• **Parrett (2024):**

- The study titled "The Moral Justifications of the Justice-Experienced : Recidivism in Dark Triadic Morally Disengaging Offenders" aimed to examine the relationship between dark triad traits (psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism) and moral disengagement strategies in explaining recidivism among violent offenders.

Using an analytical approach with a sample of incarcerated individuals, the study employed psychological measures to assess personality traits and moral justification strategies.

The results showed that the highest rates of recidivism were found among offenders with psychopathic traits who used strategies such as euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, and moral justification.

• **Berman et al. (2019):**

The study titled "Measuring Psychological Change and Predicting Recidivism Following the Swedish One-to-One Program" evaluated the effectiveness of the One-to-One rehabilitation program in Sweden. Using a quantitative approach with 776 participants, the researchers assessed psychological and behavioral changes before and after the program with several standardized tests. Results showed that completing the program was the strongest predictor of non-recidivism, as non-completers were 64% more likely to reoffend. Improvements in skills, locus of control, and attitudes were also linked to reduced recidivism, supporting the program's theoretical basis.

• **Zabala-Baños et al. (2019):**

The study "Functioning of psychopathy and trait aggression as predictive variables of criminal recidivism" investigated the impact of aggression and psychopathy traits on recidivism among 110 male inmates in Spain. Using standardized measures, the researchers found that 55.8% were persistent offenders, with higher aggression and psychopathic meanness scores among recidivists and those with mental disorders. Psychopathic meanness was the strongest predictor of reoffending. Although mental disorder alone was not a statistically significant predictor, recidivists more often had a mental disorder and higher aggression. The findings suggest that aggression and psychopathic traits, especially meanness, are key risk factors for recidivism.

6. Study Method :

According to Reuchlin (1998), the clinical method is considered one of the fundamental approaches in psychology, characterized by being a focused and in-depth study of an individual case within its environmental and social context. This approach is not limited to

data collection only ; it extends to a comprehensive analysis of psychological conflicts, defense mechanisms, and the surrounding conditions that affect the individual's behavior and mental state. ((Reuchlin, 1995)

7. Study tools :

5.1 The clinical interview:

The clinical interview was relied upon as the main tool for collecting qualitative data about the studied case. The semi-structured interview was specifically chosen because it allows the researcher to guide the conversation towards specific topics related to the study while giving the interviewee the freedom to express their experiences and feelings spontaneously. This method ensures the collection of rich and flexible data, and allows for the observation of fine details that may not appear in fully structured or completely open interviews.

5.2 Thematic Apperception Test (TAT):

Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) is one of the most prominent projective tests used in clinical psychology, aiming to assess personality and its unconscious dynamics. It was developed in 1935 by psychologists Henry Murray and Christiana Morgan at Harvard University, and it is based on the fundamental principle that individuals tend to project their thoughts, feelings, and internal conflicts onto ambiguous situations.

The test consists of a series of cards containing ambiguous images of people in different situations. The examinee is asked to create a story for each image, including :

2. What led to this situation ?
3. What do the people in the story think and feel ?
- What will happen next ? (What is the outcome ?)

These stories provide the analyst with a window into the individual's inner world, revealing needs, motives, conflicts, and defense mechanisms that the person may not be aware of.

Interview Summary :

Amin is a 19-year-old young man, the middle child among four siblings, who lost his father at a young age and whose mother works in a simple job to support the family. Amin lives in difficult economic and social conditions and suffers from weak family support and the pressures of responsibility. In 2019, he was involved in a theft case and was sentenced to one year in prison, where he actually entered on March 15, 2020, and was released in April 2021 after serving the full sentence. He had also previously received a suspended sentence at a younger age due to a physical assault on one of his friends.

He joined a vocational training program inside the correctional facility during his imprisonment at the insistence of his mother, and continued his studies through correspondence education. After his release, he registered for the baccalaureate exam as a private candidate.

Presentation of TAT test results

Card analysis :

Card 1B :

The parents set certain goals for him, but like his mother they brandish a pen and paper to sketch what they want. They try their best to make their dreams come true through their son. He is struggling to let go of this past and concentrate on the future he longs for, as well as his feelings of guilt toward their unmet expectations. That's a lot of weight for him to lose.

Formal and content analysis :

The time patterns (20s latency, 2min response) suggest very strong emotional involvement and a deep internal conflict. There is clarity and arrangement to language, expressive language is good, a tone of hesitation and pauses, indicating anxiety is apparent.

Tone of voice (staccato drumming, slower drawling) prove emotional arousal. The tale is quite unique yet also unfinished, like an active conflict.

At the heart of the novel is the struggle between the desire for personal fulfillment and independence, and parental control and family obligation. This interaction generates guilt-avoidance and subjects it to mental processes that are full of anxiety and conflict.

The identified defense mechanisms are intellectualization as a defense to relieve tension, and repression of negative affect and suppression of affectively intense feelings.

Ego strength is modest ; the case can experience the conflict and its intricacies but does not have enough determination to come to a conclusion or get rid of the past.

Card 2b :

The study is not just a personal ambition, but à protected against a difficult situation. They think they have the ability to do so, but the circumstances are in the way.

Formal and material analysis:

Temporary characteristics (little delay and small response) indicate the clarity of the idea of rescue and internal conflict. The language is short and direct, focuses high on the contradiction between self -capacity and external obstacles. The tone occurs between confidence and less frustration, reflecting a double emotional tone. The story is original to add studies to save, and reflect the ongoing challenge at the open end.

The main theme is the discovery of performance such as "rescue" in front of obstacles, and conflict between personal ability and belief in external obstacles. Great demands are performance (n achievement), which not only reflect the desire for skill, but also a defense mechanism against failure, and prevents pain (pain prevention), which appears from the fear of expectations. These needs interact with financial pressure, high family expectations and a sense of enormous responsibility, creating internal conflicts that run the adaptive mechanism.

Defense mechanisms such as high appearance (academic performance in anxiety channel) and compensation (extreme efforts to succeed to compensate for feelings of insufficiency or failure) are clear.

When it comes to endurance and endurance under pressure, the strength of the ego looks very strong ; However, there is a risk of emotional breakdown or fatigue due to severe strain and lack of self -sufficiency.

Card 3BM :

He feels devastating despair after making a serious mistake that affected someone dear to him, perhaps a friend or a family member. The gun is not for killing.

Formal and content analysis :

The long latency (15-20 seconds) and emotionally intense response indicate severe anxiety and difficulty processing the painful emotional content related to guilt and despair. The language is concise and direct, expressing pain ("devastating despair," "serious mistake"). The tone is tense and dominated by despair, with pauses reflecting the weight of guilt. The symbolic interpretation of the gun fits the psychological context. The ending is extremely negative and unresolved, reflecting the absence of a psychological way out. The main theme centers on deep guilt and remorse, and an internal struggle with the desire for self-punishment. The prominent needs are self-punishment (n Self-Punishment), manifested in immersing himself in despair as a form of self-punishment, and avoidance (n Avoidance) of any attempt that might increase the pain. These needs interact with internal guilt (p Internal Guilt), severe consequences (p Severe Consequences), and helplessness (p Helplessness), pushing the case into a state of despair and rumination about the past with a sense of powerlessness.

Defense mechanisms such as regression into despair and helplessness, obsessive rumination on guilt, and isolation of feelings or withdrawal from others are evident.

Ego strength appears very weak in facing this internal conflict ; it is exhausted and unable to find effective coping mechanisms to escape guilt and despair.

Card 4B :

He sees in front of him a violent fight between two men, and it seems that this scene brings back memories of old family conflicts he experienced in childhood. There was always a woman standing in the background, silent, affected, and unable to intervene. He feels anger at this violence and has a strong urge to intervene to protect the weaker party and impose some form of justice, but he hesitates. He fears being drawn into the cycle of violence he rejects, or getting involved in something beyond his capacity. He is torn between what he sees as a moral duty and his desire to avoid harm.

Formal and content analysis :

The response indicates a complex internal conflict reflected in apparent hesitation. The language expresses anger and conflict, with an open-ended conclusion that reflects indecision. The latency and response time are assumed to be medium to long, indicating deep processing of painful memories.

The main theme revolves around the conflict between action and inaction in the face of violence. The scene activates memories of family violence (Traumatic Memories), stimulating both the need for nurturance to protect the victim and the need for aggression seeking justice. However, the pressure of traumatic experiences (p Traumatic Memories) counters these motives and activates the need for avoidance, creating an acute internal conflict between moral commitment and self-protection from harm or involvement.

Defense mechanisms are manifested in indecision as a way to avoid making an undesirable decision, and observation instead of action as a means to avoid involvement. This may also indicate repression of anger directed toward violence.

Ego strength appears moderate ; it is aware of and strongly affected by the moral conflict but lacks a decisive mechanism to deal with it, resulting in continuous hesitation.

Card 6BM :

He sees this scene as if it is a confrontation between himself and his father, or another authority figure. The older man appears to be blaming or reproaching him for something, or trying to impose his opinion. He feels great pressure to prove that he has grown up, that he is capable of making his own decisions, and that he is no longer just a child following instructions. Deep inside, he has a strong desire to rebel against this authority and to demonstrate his abilities, even if it leads to conflict or tension in the relationship. He is seeking recognition of his independence.

Formal and Content Analysis :

The response indicates a strong conflict around authority and autonomy. The language is clear and direct, with a tone suggesting challenge and determination. The response is assumed to be medium to long, reflecting deep engagement with the theme of authority relationships.

The analysis indicates that, in the absence of the father, the individual tends to internalize and adopt the paternal authority, attempting to apply the standards of discipline and self-control acquired from the paternal model. This pattern reflects what Erik Erikson described in his theory of psychosocial development, where identity formation during adolescence and young adulthood is a central task deeply influenced by the individual's relationship with family authority figures, even after their physical absence. Recent studies confirm that the process of identity formation does not end with adolescence but continues

and evolves over time, especially when the individual faces challenges related to autonomy and self-assertion in the absence of direct paternal reference. (Mitchell et al., 2021)

In this context, the need for self-discipline and the demonstration of competence emerge as fundamental motives, as the individual seeks to impose order on himself or his environment, drawing on the internalized image of the father. Defense mechanisms such as identification and rationalization become prominent as means of coping with internal pressures, while ego strength remains fluctuating between the desire for control and the fear of failing to meet the symbolic standards set by the father.

Card 7BM:

The look in the old man's eyes is not just a glance ; it is a deep, evaluative gaze, as if a teacher is watching his student or a coach is observing his player. The young man feels as if he is under a microscope, not only from this person but from everyone who has high hopes for him. He feels immense pressure to be the best, to prove that he can meet the great expectations placed upon him. This generates anxiety about failure—not just in the current test or challenge, but about disappointing others—which drives him to push himself toward perfection.

- Main Theme : Excessive striving for perfection under the pressure of high expectations, and existential anxiety about failure and disappointing others.
- Beta Press (Self-Perception): The man's gaze symbolizes constant evaluation and future expectations; the subject feels under scrutiny, pressured to achieve perfection, and fears disappointment.
- Needs :
 - Achievement : A strong drive to excel and stand out.
 - Recognition : The desire for praise and acknowledgment of efforts.
 - Avoidance of Failure : Intense fear of not meeting goals or letting others down.
 - Perfection: Motivation to reach the highest possible standards.
- Presse :
 - Constant Evaluation : Feeling monitored and assessed by authority or important figures.
 - High Expectations : The great hopes others have for him.
 - Accountability : The sense of needing to deliver the best to avoid disappointment.
- Need-Press Interaction : The needs for achievement, recognition, and perfection are strongly activated by constant evaluation and high expectations, creating an urgent need to avoid failure. This drives the subject to exert great effort, but also increases his anxiety and pushes him toward excessive perfectionism.
- Defense Mechanisms :
 - Perfectionism : Striving for flawlessness as a way to control anxiety and avoid failure.
 - Over-diligence : Hard work as a coping strategy for pressure.
 - Anxiety : As a response to ongoing pressures and fear of failure.
- Ego Strength : Strong, able to withstand pressure and work diligently, but may be burdened by persistent anxiety and exhausting perfectionism, which could affect psychological well-being.

Card 8B:

He sees this scene as if he is recalling a painful childhood memory, perhaps the death of a loved one after illness or a tragic accident. The violent scene behind the young boy symbolizes a deep wound in his soul. He no longer feels the helplessness he once

experienced ; on the contrary, this pain has made him stronger and more responsible toward others. It may have led him to choose a helping profession, such as medicine, or to become a support for those going through difficult times. It is as if he wants to transform this harsh experience into positive energy that helps himself and others.

Formal and Content Analysis:

The response indicates a deep and meaningful processing of a painful experience, specifically the death of his father, with a noticeable shift in tone from helplessness to strength. The language is expressive and symbolically rich.

The main theme centers on psychological transformation from childhood trauma and helplessness (p Trauma / p Past Helplessness) to a strong drive for nurturance (n Nurturance / n Reparation) and self-actualization (n Self-Actualization). The need for inner strength (n Inner Strength) emerges as a motive to overcome past weakness. This interaction between emotional pain and past trauma, and the needs for care and compensation, pushes the individual to extract positive meaning from his experience and turn it into motivation for work and service.

The defense mechanisms show notable maturity, especially sublimation—channeling painful emotions into constructive, socially beneficial behaviors (such as choosing a helping profession) and reaction formation, overcoming previous helplessness by turning it into strength and control.

Ego strength appears very strong and flexible, showing a high capacity to process psychological trauma and transform it into positive, goal-oriented energy.

Card 9BM :

He sees a man running in a field, with another man chasing him. This scene represents an internal conflict: is he running away from a major problem or heavy responsibility that is pursuing him, or is he chasing a big goal and believes someone is trying to thwart or compete with him? He feels pressure and tension, as if time is chasing him. He tries to avoid something, but knows that confrontation is inevitable in the end, or that reaching the goal requires great determination against all odds.

Formal and Content Analysis :

The response indicates significant internal tension and anxiety, with awareness of the conflict and the inevitability of confrontation. The language is clear and reflects a state of hesitation between two opposing drives.

The main theme revolves around the individual's conflict between escaping problems and responsibilities (n Escape / p Responsibility) and persistent striving to achieve goals (n Achievement / n Counteraction) in the face of pressures of pursuit (p Persecution) and competition (p Competition). This interaction shows an awareness that confrontation is inevitable and that achieving the goal requires determination despite difficulties.

Defense mechanisms such as flight (physically or psychologically) to avoid confrontation, procrastination, and possibly partial denial of the inevitability of some confrontations are highlighted.

Ego strength appears variable ; it is aware of the pressures and conflicts and tries to cope with them through mechanisms that may include temporary escape or delay, indicating a continuous effort to adapt to challenges despite the accompanying tension.

Card 10:

In this scene, the young man sees a figure running through a field, being pursued by another man from behind. This depiction reflects an inner sense of conflict and pressure, as if time or responsibilities are relentlessly chasing him. The young man tries to distance himself from something weighing him down, yet he realizes deep inside that confrontation is inevitable, or that achieving his desired goal will require persistence and continuous effort.

Signs of tension are evident in his eyes, and his tone reveals a hesitation between the desire to escape and the need to face the challenge.

Formal and Thematic Analysis:

The response latency is average (about 30 seconds), and the language used is clear and correct, with some noticeable hesitation in certain parts, reflecting a state of careful thinking and perhaps underlying anxiety. Thematically, the response points to a sharp internal conflict between two opposing drives : escaping problems and responsibilities on one hand, and striving to achieve goals despite the pressures of pursuit and competition on the other. This dynamic reflects an awareness that the ongoing conflict inevitably requires a resolution, whether positive or negative.

Clear defensive mechanisms emerge, such as flight as a means to avoid confrontation, procrastination in decision-making, and the possible presence of partial denial of pressures or challenges. Ego strength appears unstable ; it recognizes the extent of pressures and conflicts and attempts to cope with them through temporary mechanisms such as escape or delay, indicating a continuous effort to adapt to challenges despite the accompanying tension. Overall, this response reflects a psychological dynamic characterized by vacillation between confrontation and avoidance, with anxiety clearly present as both a motive and a driver of behavior.

Card 11 :

The examinee describes a scene of an intense argument between two men who share a close relationship, where the discussion escalates to a level of aggression and emotional tension. This scene evokes in the examinee feelings of stress and anxiety associated with interpersonal conflicts. The response latency was moderate (25 seconds), indicating a state of hesitation and confusion when facing this type of pressure.

Formal and Thematic Analysis :

Psychologically, there is a clear internal conflict between the need to maintain social relationships (social drives) and the fear of losing them, versus the necessity to defend oneself when feeling threatened or wronged (coping with stress). This conflict generates feelings of frustration and anxiety, especially in the presence of aggressive behavior in the situation.

Defense mechanisms appear in the form of indecision as a way to avoid making a choice that could have negative consequences, as well as excessive rumination about the available options. There is also a tendency toward avoidance as a protective response to prevent escalation or worsening of the conflict.

Ego strength appears to be moderate ; the examinee shows awareness of the complexity of the social situation but finds it difficult to make a decisive choice about whether to intervene or withdraw. This reflects a persistent internal conflict between the desire to maintain the relationship and the anxiety about confrontation and the frustration resulting from the aggression present in the situation.

Card 12B:

He spies a man running up the road, the house looms large behind him. Perhaps this man is returning home after a lengthy and draining trip. Otherwise, he might flee pressure in the workplace or trouble abroad. Back within the shelter of his own four walls, he could rely on close family to offer support on the hard days. The house is his cocoon here, he can drop his weariness and recuperate a certain amount of fire from his family or their presence. It was, perhaps, after a life of struggles or uncertainties, a feeling of seeking refuge, back to the 'roots' and a safe place, somehow a fort to be protected against the brutality of the outside.

Formal and content analysis :

Response expressiveness is associated with high need for stability and safety after a period of stress and unsettlement. The language is clear and filled with the sense of the stress,

which is where being cocooned comes in. There is a tone of alternately weariness and hope projected, and the image of the house as cocoon is underlined. Yamneh, Seeking Shelter as an adaptation to stress. Self-apparent strength seems to be moderate to strong when she knows that she needs ease and safety and acts in anticipation of it; this is the skill to protect oneself from easily drained from outside and look for stability.

Table 01 : Analysis of TAT Results

Card No.	Main Extracted Theme	Psychological Needs / Drives	Conflicts or Pressures	Defense Mechanisms	Ego Strength
1B	Conflict between autonomy and parental expectations	Autonomy, self-actualization	Parental control, guilt	Overthinking, repression	Moderate
2B	Achievement as a means of rescue from circumstances	Achievement, avoidance of pain	Economic conditions, family responsibility	Sublimation, compensation	Strong
3BM	Guilt and despair after a serious mistake	Self-punishment, avoidance	Internal guilt, helplessness	Regression, rumination	Weak
4B	Moral conflict in facing violence	Nurturance, aggression, avoidance	Memories of family violence	Indecision, passivity	Moderate
6BM	Struggle with parental authority and self-assertion	Autonomy, rebelliousness	Parental authority, blame	Defiance, rationalization	Strong
7BM	Striving for perfection under pressure	Achievement, recognition, perfection	Constant evaluation, high expectations	Perfectionism, over-diligence	Strong
8B	Transforming pain into strength and motivation to help	Nurturance, self-actualization	Childhood trauma, emotional pain	Sublimation, reaction formation	strong
9BM	Conflict between escaping responsibility and striving for achievement	Escape, achievement	Pursuit, competition	Flight, procrastination	Fluctuating
10B	Conflict in relationships: maintaining vs. confronting	Affiliation, nurturance, intervention	Conflict, aggression	Indecision, overthinking	Moderate
11B	Importance of support in facing vulnerability	Nurturance, affiliation	Human vulnerability	Sublimation, identification	Strong
12B	Seeking safety and returning to roots	Safety, affiliation	External pressures	Withdrawal, seeking shelter	Moderate to strong

(Prepared by the researchers)

Discussion :

The purpose of this systematic review was to investigate the specificity of psychological functioning among recidivists, with particular emphasis on identifying the defense mechanisms employed by these individuals and evaluating their ego strength.

The findings of this review provide a deeper understanding of recidivism among individuals characterized by distinct psychological functioning. By highlighting the defense mechanisms utilized by these individuals, the review demonstrates that these psychological domains should not be considered in isolation. Instead, the synthesized data indicate a more dynamic and integrated model, in which criminal trajectories are shaped by both ego fragility and the deployment of defense mechanisms such as denial, repression, and guilt.

It is important to note that chronic substance use, as observed in this case, is associated with alterations in the neural structures of the brain responsible for impulse control, stress regulation, and emotional modulation. These neurobiological changes may negatively impact performance and behavior, diminishing the individual's capacity to regulate emotions and delay gratification. This was evident in the subject's resort to theft, even in the absence of acute external pressures at that moment (**Day et al., 2025**) Recent neuroimaging studies further confirm that chronic substance abuse leads to significant structural and functional changes in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, which are critical for self-control and emotional regulation. For example, Volkow et al. (2016) demonstrated that individuals with long-term substance use disorders exhibit reduced activity in brain regions involved in inhibitory control and decision-making, increasing vulnerability to impulsive and maladaptive behaviors (**Day et al., 2025; Volkow et al., 2016**)

The severity of this emotional dysregulation is further exacerbated when the individual is confronted with additional psychological and social stressors, such as the loss of a parent or familial pressures related to the mother's expectations and her desire for the son to complete his studies. The convergence of these factors created a cumulative cycle of emotional stress for the case, contributing to increased impulsive behaviors and greater difficulty adapting to stressful situations. (**Syasyila et al., 2025**)

It is noteworthy in this study that there is considerable diversity in the defense mechanisms exhibited by recidivists, with manifestations of guilt on one hand and denial on the other, alongside a pronounced drive for achievement and success, as revealed by the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).

Recent research indicates that individuals who reoffend often experience additional psychological and social vulnerabilities, such as a history of trauma, familial criminal background, or a lack of effective social support. This aligns with the perspective of Walters, who argues that the relationship between family and psychological history and recidivism is often direct and depends on clear, straightforward variables rather than being solely complex or intrinsic. (**Walters, 2022**)

These findings are consistent with the propositions of social learning theory, which posits that criminal behavior does not arise solely from individual motives or psychological vulnerability, but is also shaped through interaction with a social environment that supports or justifies such conduct. Psychological factors, such as feelings of guilt or the need for achievement, intersect with the influence of family, peers, and the absence of social support, creating fertile ground for the repetition of criminal behavior. The theory further asserts that individuals who grow up in environments lacking positive social bonds or who experience family disintegration are more likely to adopt deviant behavioral patterns. (**Bozec, 2025**)

These findings underscore the need for multi-level, coordinated approaches that target both general psychological readiness and individual social vulnerabilities. The results have shown that participation in community-based treatment programs, post-release supervision, and pre-release planning all offer significant benefits. Research in the field of rehabilitation supports that individuals who take part in structured reintegration initiatives have lower rates of recidivism compared to those who do not receive institutional support.

Moreover, the specificity of psychological and social functioning varies according to several factors, including social context, medical history, and social background—further highlighting the individuality of each case.

Conclusion :

This study showed that psychological functioning among recidivists is characterized by the interplay of internal conflicts and defense mechanisms, such as repression and denial, along with fluctuations in ego strength when facing pressures. The importance of these findings lies in the need to include components in rehabilitation programs that focus on addressing psychological conflicts and strengthening family and social support, which may contribute to reducing the likelihood of recidivism.

Despite the significance of these results, the study's limitation to a single case represents a clear shortcoming, given the clinical method's focus on the individual. Therefore, the study recommends expanding future research to include larger samples and employing diverse methodologies to achieve more generalizable and practically useful results

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