Leadership in organized crime: Psychological insights and implications

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Leadership plays a critical role in the success, stability, and internal management of criminal organizations. Understanding the psychological traits and leadership styles of criminal leaders is essential for developing effective strategies to disrupt organized crime. This literature review examines the psychological characteristics and leadership models that allow criminal leaders to maintain authority, gain loyalty, and manage illegal operations. Studies were selected based on their focus on leadership in criminal groups, social dynamics, and psychological factors, covering a range of criminal organizations across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Leadership styles are categorized into four main types: entrepreneurial, prophetic, realist, and social victim. The review used clear selection criteria and searched databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar with keywords including "criminal leadership," "organized crime psychology," and "gang dynamics." Peer-reviewed studies from the past 15 years were prioritized, with older sources included only when offering essential theoretical insights. The findings show that traits like courage, violence, organizational ability, and charisma help criminal leaders influence group behavior and maintain control. Each leadership type has specific strengths and weaknesses that shape group unity and strategy. While charisma and management skills can build loyalty, fear-based control through violence may weaken over time. A leader's adaptability and the social environment also affect their influence. Case studies are used to support the proposed leadership models. Overall, leadership traits and models have a major impact on the operation and survival of criminal organizations, but the diversity of leadership styles and the specific contexts in which these groups operate make it difficult to design universal intervention strategies.

1. Introduction

Given the substantial influence that leaders have on both criminal behavior and group dynamics, the study of leadership in criminal organizations has drawn significant interest in the disciplines of criminology and psychology. Criminal groups, in contrast to isolated criminal actors, are frequently highly organized and capable of conducting intricate, large-scale unlawful activities (Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou, 2018; Wyatt et al., 2020). The role of the leader is particularly influential in these types of organizations, as they are responsible for guiding the actions of group members, ensuring the success of criminal enterprises, and maintaining internal cohesion (Čižikienė and Urmanavicius, 2021). These responsibilities underscore the significance of leadership in the context of organized crime and imply that the psychological characteristics of the leader are essential to the group's overall effectiveness. Research on criminal group behavior consistently demonstrates that a person's tendency to commit more severe or violent criminal activities is elevated by their membership in a group. Compared to solitary offenders, individuals in criminal groups are substantially more likely to engage in high-risk activities, as evidenced by early studies conducted by Thrasher (2013) and Vigil (1988). These discoveries are indicative of the substantial impact that group dynamics have on the decision-making processes of individuals, frequently resulting in an increase in aggression and illicit

activity (Hoeben and Thomas, 2019). A sense of shared purpose and belonging is fostered by group membership, which can encourage individuals to perpetrate crimes that they may have otherwise avoided if they were acting alone.

The leader of a criminal organization is not simply a nominal figure; they are the strategic and psychological cornerstone that unifies the group (Eldar, 2012). Leaders are accountable for strategizing and coordinating the group's illicit activities, establishing objectives, and allocating responsibilities among members. Furthermore, leaders frequently impose discipline within the group with a blend of psychological manipulation, incentives, and coercion (Vugt and Ronay, 2014). Their capacity to evoke terror, loyalty, and respect allows them to exert control over the group's members, ensuring their continued commitment to the group's unlawful objectives.

Criminal leaders employ many tactics to manipulate and influence their followers from a psychological standpoint (Chopin and Dupont, 2024). These may encompass cultivating a sense of camaraderie and collective purpose or using fear and violence as mechanisms of control. By establishing themselves as essential, leaders can secure the group's allegiance and operational efficacy. Leaders frequently exhibit distinct psychological characteristics, like bravery, charm, and a tendency towards aggression, which enhance their effectiveness in their positions (Sosik, 2015). These characteristics, along with a profound comprehension of the group's internal dynamics, enable leaders to solidify authority and guarantee the group's long-term sustainability.

Comprehending the psychological and operational functions of leaders inside criminal organizations is crucial for law enforcement and criminal justice entities. Effective interventions frequently necessitate the disassembly of the leadership framework within criminal groups, as leaders are generally the individuals who unify the group (Lessing, 2021). By exploiting the psychological vulnerabilities and leadership frameworks within these groups, law enforcement can undermine their activities and diminish organized crime. Consequently, examining the psychological traits of criminal leaders and the tactics they employ to exert control is essential for formulating more effective crime prevention and intervention strategies (Braga et al., 2018).

This emphasis on leadership dynamics beyond the operational features of criminal organizations also encompasses the comprehension of the social and psychological connections that leaders establish within their groups. Leaders are frequently perceived as guardians or mentors by their followers, so they augment their power (Wong, 2013). The manipulation of these relationships, along with the purposeful application of violence, can engender a formidable, fear-induced allegiance within the organization, complicating members' ability to defect or collaborate with law enforcement.

Leadership in criminal organizations is complex and fundamentally rooted in the psychological manipulation of members and the strategic orchestration of illicit actions (Ayling, 2009). The leader's influence pervades all levels of the group's operations, rendering them pivotal to the success of the organization's illicit activities. A thorough understanding of the psychological characteristics and leadership styles of criminal group leaders is crucial for individuals engaged in the fight against organized crime (Bonta and Andrews, 2016). Utilizing this perspective, law enforcement can more effectively identify the leaders of these organizations, so interrupt their operations and ultimately diminish the incidence of organized crime.

2. Theoretical background and scope of the study

2.1. Definitions and group structure

Criminal organizations, akin to other social entities, function based on fundamental principles of human interaction, group dynamics, and shared objectives (Stangor, 2015). In contrast to legal or conventional entities, criminal organizations are characterized by their involvement in illicit activities that pose considerable dangers to society's well-being (Allum and Siebert, 2003). Comprehending the composition of these groupings and their operational dynamics is essential for understanding the function of leadership within them. In psychology, Vu Dung broadly defines a "group" as a community of two or more individuals that share common interests, pursue shared objectives, and mutually influence each other's activities. This term is relevant to criminal organizations, with the additional aspect of illegality. These groups not only seek shared objectives but also engage in behaviors that are socially detrimental and legally prohibited.

2.2. Group dynamics in criminal organizations

In criminal organizations, group dynamics profoundly affect individual behavior and the collective functioning of the group (Giordano et al., 2017; van Elteren et al., 2024). Group members form intricate interpersonal relationships, frequently grounded in shared experiences, reciprocal benefits, or power dynamics. The illicit nature of their actions cultivates a distinctive milieu that enhances bonds among members due to the inherent risks involved. These members rely on one another for security, trust, and collective success in their illicit endeavors.

Criminal organizations can be categorized into two primary types based on their structure, hierarchy, and degree of organization.

Temporary/Simple Groups. Temporary or simple criminal groups are characterized by their loose, informal structure. They frequently emerge from interpersonal contacts, such as familial bonds or friendships, where trust is cultivated through personal ties rather than official regulations or codes

of conduct. These organizations frequently partake in transient or opportunistic criminal activities, such as minor larceny or insignificant illicit transactions, devoid of a long-term strategy or explicit distribution of tasks. Leadership within these groups is frequently informal, with certain members possessing enhanced influence due to their age, skill, or personal appeal. Nonetheless, there exists no rigid hierarchy, and roles within the group may be flexible. The absence of structure permits increased flexibility, although it also constrains the group's capacity to participate in more intricate or extended illicit activities. Affiliations among transient criminal enterprises frequently rely on reciprocal convenience instead of allegiance to a specific leader. Individuals may collaborate for a certain crime or series of crimes and subsequently dissolve their association once the endeavor concludes. Owing to the absence of official leadership and structure, these organizations are less inclined to participate in extensive organized crime. Instead, they function in smaller, less coordinated operations, rendering them a lower priority for law enforcement compared to highly organized and stable criminal networks.

Stable/Complex Groups. Temporary or simple criminal groups are characterized by their loose, informal structure. They frequently emerge from interpersonal contacts, such as familial bonds or friendships, where trust is cultivated through personal ties rather than official regulations or codes of conduct (Campana, 2023). These organizations frequently partake in transient or opportunistic criminal activities, such as minor larceny or insignificant illicit transactions, devoid of a long-term strategy or explicit distribution of tasks. Leadership within these groups is frequently informal, with certain members possessing enhanced influence due to their age, skill, or personal appeal (Verba, 2015). Nonetheless, there exists no rigid hierarchy, and roles within the group may be flexible. The absence of structure permits increased flexibility, although it also constrains the group's capacity to participate in more intricate or extended illicit activities. Affiliations among transient criminal enterprises frequently rely on reciprocal convenience instead of allegiance to a specific leader. Individuals may collaborate for a certain crime or series of crimes and subsequently dissolve their association once the endeavor concludes. Owing to the absence of official leadership and structure, these organizations are less inclined to participate in extensive organized crime. Instead, they function in smaller, less coordinated operations, rendering them a lower priority for law enforcement compared to highly organized and stable criminal networks.

2.3. Models of leadership in criminal organizations

The leader of a criminal organization is typically characterized as an individual who occupies a significant and authoritative position within the group, responsible for orchestrating and overseeing the group's illicit operations. Rostami (2010) contends that the leader of a criminal organization typically possesses high status and plays a pivotal role in supervising the group's operations. This includes the generation of preliminary concepts, the formulation of strategies, and the orchestration of illicit actions. Warr (1996) and Donald and Wilson (2021) underscored that the leader of criminal groups typically formulates tactics, establishes objectives for the group's endeavors, and is frequently consulted by members for guidance on executing illicit activities.

Donald and Wilson (2021) contend that the leader is accountable for overseeing the proceeds of criminal enterprises, allocating illicit assets, and determining the distribution of the group's outcomes. Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) contend that the leader of a criminal organization typically wields near-absolute authority over its members and reaps considerable advantages from the group's illicit endeavors. In Vietnam, the leader of a criminal organization is characterized as an individual who exerts total control over the group's operations, dictates the course of illicit activities, governs member conduct, and allocates the profits derived from these endeavors. The dynamic between the leader and members is frequently defined by authority, hubris, and compliance, with leaders exerting control via mandates and force. Definitions suggest that the leader of a criminal organization is pivotal in decision-making and planning, as well as in sustaining order within the group through hierarchical dynamics of dominance and submission.

Psychological studies on criminal group leadership have produced multiple models that elucidate the diverse motivations, behaviors, and leadership styles evident in various criminal groups. These theories elucidate the many approaches leaders choose in their positions within a group, their interactions with followers, and their methods of maintaining control over illegal enterprises (Merton, 2017; Rostami, 2010). Comprehending these models enables us to acquire insights into the intricate dynamics that regulate criminal organizations and the characteristics that contribute to the success of their leaders in these unlawful activities. Each model embodies a unique amalgamation of leadership characteristics, organizational tactics, and psychological factors that influence group dynamics.

2.4. The entrepreneurial model

Leaders within the entrepreneurial model are predominantly motivated by practical and commercially oriented objectives. These leaders saw illicit operations as commercial prospects, seeking monetary profit and the expansion of their unlawful ventures. They concentrate on lucrative enterprises such as drug trafficking, extortion, human trafficking, money laundering, and illicit gaming (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2018). Unlike other

leadership styles, entrepreneurial CEOs frequently assign ordinary criminal operations to their subordinates, concentrating on strategic decision-making and sustaining the organization's revenue generation.

Entrepreneurial CEOs frequently exhibit operational parallels to those of leaders in illicit enterprises. Their leadership characteristics encompass the quest for financial independence and stability, frequently merging lawful economic endeavors with illicit enterprises to fabricate an illusion of legality. Numerous mafia or drug cartel leaders manage legitimate enterprises, including restaurants, clubs, or real estate firms, which serve as fronts for laundering the profits from their illicit operations. This duality enables them to manage extensive activities while evading detection by law enforcement.

Their drive for leadership is not rooted in a desire for aggression or social dominance but rather in the quest for financial achievement. These commanders perceive their criminal enterprises as commercial endeavors, primarily aimed at profit maximization. Their leadership strategy is frequently self-serving, prioritizing the accumulation of wealth and the preservation of their status in both the criminal underworld and, in certain instances, legal corporate sectors. Corporate CEOs may collaborate with corrupt officials, politicians, or other influential figures to safeguard their enterprises and enhance their criminal networks.

A key characteristic of this methodology is the leader's capacity to compartmentalize functions, assigning certain responsibilities to reliable subordinates while retaining overarching authority. This delegation safeguards the leader from direct engagement in unlawful acts, reducing personal risk while ensuring the organization's efficient functioning. This technique may occasionally result in challenges in sustaining loyalty, as members could perceive a disconnection from the leader, particularly if rewards are allocated inequitably.

2.5. The prophetic model

Prophetic leadership is characterized by charismatic, visionary leaders. These leaders inspire their adherents with grandiloquent discourse and frequently depict their unlawful activities as serving a greater, more significant objective. Prophetic leaders are driven not merely by financial incentives; rather, they pursue psychological and emotional fulfillment, encompassing admiration, loyalty, and esteem from their adherents (Muhammad, 2015). They frequently present themselves as guardians, saviors, or messianic characters within the organization, with their leadership founded on profound emotional connections with their followers. In this approach, leaders foster robust personal relationships with their followers, perceiving them as essential constituents of an extended family or community. The allegiance and dedication exhibited by members towards their leader are the basis for group cohesion and success. Prophetic leaders frequently possess the ability to unite their adherents around a shared objective, be it ideological, religious, or a skewed perception of justice. This trend is especially prevalent in extreme organizations, revolutionary movements, or criminal gangs with robust ideological or cultural foundations.

The unlawful activities of these groups frequently acquire symbolic significance as leaders contextualize them within a broader battle or objective. In certain street gangs or organized crime syndicates, the leader may evoke concepts of loyalty, honor, or vengeance, endowing the group's violent deeds with a purpose that transcends mere profit. These leaders frequently regard themselves as fulfilling a noble obligation to their followers, with their actions characterized as safeguarding the group or avenging perceived wrongs. This emotional and symbolic leadership cultivates a profound sense of identity and purpose within the organization, engendering strong loyalty among members and enhancing their resilience to external obstacles (Lewis, 2011). Prophetic leaders flourish due to the psychological advantages they garner from their adherents, such as adulation and esteem. They frequently manipulate this emotional connection to sway followers, compelling them to make sacrifices for the group or partake in illicit acts to achieve the leader's objectives. Due to the profound personal connections they foster, prophetic leaders can engender intense loyalty, rendering it challenging for members to depart from the group or collaborate with law authorities, even under duress. This method frequently materializes in organized gangs, militias, or criminal cults, wherein ideology and emotions are interwoven with the group's illicit activities.

2.6. The realist models

The realist model characterizes leaders as pragmatic, strategic, and highly adaptive. These leaders perceive crime as a pragmatic undertaking, considering their illicit deeds solely in pragmatic terms. They are prepared to employ any methods required to attain their objectives, encompassing violence, deceit, and treachery. Realist leaders are driven not by ideology or emotional connections to their constituents but by techniques that optimize their personal benefit (Aytac and Rossi, 2023).

Realist leaders frequently demonstrate an absence of emotionality or idealism, and they swiftly render brutal decisions to safeguard their interests (Scheuerman, 2011). This may involve sacrificing loyal members, forging temporary alliances with adversaries, or participating in violent power conflicts within the group to preserve their leadership status. These leaders are notably strategic, consistently evaluating what serves their own interests and readily abandoning the company if it ceases to fulfill their requirements. In numerous instances, realist leaders saw their subordinates as

instruments for attaining their individual objectives. They avoid forming profound emotional connections with their followers, enabling them to function with a certain level of detachment. The absence of dedication to the organization or its elements may result in internal discord, as members could grow exasperated with a leader who seems to prioritize personal interests over collective welfare. Realist leaders sustain authority by demonstrating their essentiality to the group's operations, frequently through their remarkable strategic insight or capacity to navigate intricate criminal networks.

This method is commonly observed in gangs, criminal enterprises, and organized crime syndicates marked by erratic leadership and recurrent power conflicts. Realist leaders frequently struggle to sustain long-term loyalty because of their propensity to deceive or abandon others when deemed essential. Nonetheless, their focus on immediate profit and adaptability renders them very proficient in the volatile realm of organized crime.

2.7. The victim of society model

Leaders within the social victim model witnessed themselves as embodiments of social injustice. They perceive their illegal conduct as an act of retribution against a system they believe has inadequately served them (Bumiller, 2017). These leaders frequently originate from underprivileged or impoverished origins, and their leadership is driven by sentiments of isolation, resentment, and fury. They justify their criminal conduct as a reaction to environmental injustice, perceiving themselves as victims compelled to partake in illicit activities.

These leaders are driven by a profound sense of injustice and frequently employ this story to invoke empathy and garner support from their adherents. They characterize their criminal conduct as a form of defiance against society norms and institutions that they perceive as having marginalized them from lawful chances. Individuals often ascribe their situations to societal influences, contending that poverty, discrimination, or institutional injustice have compelled them toward criminality (Unnever and Gabbidon, 2011).

Leaders in this model are frequently driven by a quest for retribution or to establish their significance in a society they view as antagonistic. Their leadership style is marked by defiance and insubordination, with unlawful behaviors portrayed as a method of asserting their existence. These leaders can cultivate a robust sense of solidarity inside their group, with members perceiving themselves as part of a collective struggle against a shared adversary—whether it is the government, law enforcement, or society at large.

This concept is prevalent in gangs or criminal organizations that arise in minority communities with constrained opportunities for legitimate success. Leaders in this approach frequently draw followers who resonate with their sentiments of frustration and isolation. The idea of collective victimhood can enhance group cohesion and complicate members' exit or disloyalty to the leader. Nonetheless, the emotional volatility and fury driving these leaders may result in erratic conduct, internal strife, and the potential for the organization to fragment under external stress (Sözen and Basım, 2022).

2.8. Psychological traits of criminal group leaders

The efficacy and longevity of criminal organizations frequently hinge on the psychological characteristics of their leaders. These characteristics empower leaders to retain authority, maneuver through intricate and perilous circumstances, and guarantee that their adherents remain loyal and dedicated to the group's illicit objectives. Criminal operators must demonstrate a distinctive amalgamation of psychological resilience, interpersonal manipulation, and strategic acumen to proficiently manage their firms (Stewart IV, 2021). The characteristics analyzed in this section—courage, brutality, organizational acumen, charisma, and authority—are frequently observed in successful leaders of criminal enterprises, enhancing their capacity to control their subordinates and elude law enforcement.

2.9. Courage and brutality

A prominent characteristic of criminal leaders is audacity, particularly in perilous and high-stakes circumstances. This bravery transcends conventional valor and is frequently coupled with a deep-seated fearlessness that empowers these leaders to face adversaries, rivals, and law enforcement unflinchingly. Courage in criminal leadership frequently manifests as the capacity to undertake risks that others may eschew, whether by participating in violent confrontations, arranging significant crimes, or safeguarding the organization from external dangers (Cockayne, 2017). This bravery is frequently linked to savagery, a characteristic that criminal leaders exploit to instill dread in both their adversaries and their adherents. Leaders who exhibit brutality acquire respect and authority within their organization by employing violence to sustain control and order. The amalgamation of valor and savagery renders these leaders formidable figures, simultaneously feared and venerated by their adherents.

Brutality serves as both a deterrent to external threats and a means of internal discipline. Criminal leaders employ violence to eradicate rivals within their ranks, penalize dissenters, and discourage challenges to their supremacy (Lessing, 2021; Thrasher, 2013). By fostering an image of ruthlessness, leaders secure the allegiance and obedience of their subordinates. The apprehension of violent retribution establishes a power dynamic that inhibits members from challenging the superior's actions or disclosing information about

the organization. An exemplary illustration of this feature is Truong Van Cam, a notorious Vietnamese crime lord whose leadership approach was marked by severe brutality. Renowned for his brutality, Truong Van Cam orchestrated the annihilation of his adversaries and employed ferocious strategies to assert his dominance. His ruthless tactics not only eradicated opposition but also solidified his position as an inviolable figure in the criminal underworld. Truong Van Cam was regarded by his followers as both a guardian and a powerful leader, providing counsel in the perilous realm of organized crime. Individuals such as Truong Van Cam exemplify the employment of violence not merely for self-defense but also as a tactic for fostering allegiance and asserting authority. By exhibiting a readiness to employ severe brutality, these leaders convey an unequivocal message to both allies and adversaries: they are prepared to utilize force to attain their objectives, and that no individual is beyond their dominion. This perception of invulnerability enables leaders to sustain internal control while asserting dominance over the broader criminal landscape.

2.10. Organizational skills

Courage and ruthlessness may establish control, although organizational skills are crucial for the daily operations and enduring viability of criminal enterprises. Proficient criminal leaders excel at orchestrating intricate operations that frequently encompass a varied network of individuals and resources. Their capacity to plot, allocate responsibilities, and execute illicit activities proficiently is a vital element in the group's success.

Organizational skills encompass not only logistical planning but also a leader's capacity to comprehend and affect the psychological moods of subordinates (Almatrooshi et al., 2016). Criminal leaders must evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their members, allocating roles that align with their abilities while ensuring loyalty and organizational unity. This psychological insight enables leaders to cultivate trust among subordinates while exercising stringent control over the organization.

Effective leaders categorize their actions, enhance information dissemination, and mitigate the danger of legal scrutiny. By preserving delineation across various facets of the organization, leaders can safeguard essential personnel and mitigate the repercussions of individual members' trepidation or treachery. This capability is particularly crucial in extensive illicit operations when the risk of infiltration or exposure is considerable. Leaders must proficiently uphold confidentiality, ensuring their actions remain concealed while effectively achieving their illicit objectives.

Truong Van Cam exhibited his organizational prowess by establishing and sustaining numerous criminal networks. His success derives not just from his ruthlessness but also from his strategic intelligence and capacity to cultivate partnerships with corrupt politicians and other criminal groups. Truong Van Cam's capacity to orchestrate significant criminal operations, including drug trafficking, extortion, and money laundering, while maintaining stringent oversight of his subordinates, renders him a formidable opponent to law enforcement. Leaders such as Truong Van Cam exemplify the significance of building connections with external entities, especially corrupt politicians and law enforcement personnel. These affiliations offer safeguarding for the group, enabling their illicit operations to persist unimpeded. The capacity to navigate between the criminal underworld and legal governmental or corporate realms is a hallmark of effective criminal leaders.

2.11. Charisma and authority

Charisma is a crucial psychological trait that enables criminal leaders to cultivate loyalty and ensure adherence (Felts, 2013). Charismatic leaders adeptly manipulate group dynamics to their advantage, frequently by cultivating personal relationships with their adherents. These leaders, via their charisma, eloquence, and presence, evoke loyalty and devotion among followers, who perceive them not merely as leaders but also as figures of respect or reverence. The efficacy of charisma resides in the leader's capacity to foster a sense of belonging and purpose within the group. Followers exhibit loyalty not solely due to fear, but also because they are convinced of the leader's vision or objectives. Charismatic leaders frequently create a narrative that ascribes significance to their unlawful actions, endowing them with a deeper meaning or purpose (Edwards, 2012). This narrative may center on themes of devotion, honor, or the disobedience of conventional standards, creating a psychological connection between the leader and their followers.

The relationship between a charismatic leader and their followers is typically hierarchical, with the leader at the apex, wielding complete authority. The relationship is founded on charm, coercion, and manipulation, with the leader employing emotional appeal and fear to sustain control. Followers cultivate a reliance on the leader for guidance, safety, and validation, rendering them less inclined to defect or forsake the group.

Charismatic criminal leaders can exploit their personal traits as a source of power, utilizing their charm to control both adherents and external forces, such as politicians, corporate executives, and fellow criminals (Krasno and LaPides, 2015). This charisma enables leaders to forge coalitions, negotiate agreements, and amplify their impact beyond their immediate sphere. Charismatic criminal leaders often attain fame or popularity that transcends the criminal realm, thereby augmenting their authority.

Charismatic and influential leaders frequently hold a distinctive status, evoking both admiration and dread among their followers. They can evoke profound allegiance while concurrently exerting dominance over the group through intimidation and

violence. This amalgamation of characteristics renders them challenging to address internally and even more arduous to displace via external law enforcement measures.

The psychological traits of criminal leadership, violence, organizational acumen, charisma, and authority are crucial to the efficacy and durability of illegal enterprises (Rego et al., 2012). These characteristics enable leaders to exert authority, foster loyalty, and manipulate both their adherents and other parties to fulfill their illicit aims. Comprehending these characteristics is crucial for law enforcement organizations aiming to dismantle organized crime, since addressing the psychological underpinnings of leadership within these factions can serve as an effective strategy for interrupting their activities.

3. Discussion

While previous research has examined criminal leadership in isolation, this study provides a synthesized model categorizing leadership types with psychological analysis. Moreover, it bridges criminology and psychology, offering actionable insights for law enforcement to identify vulnerabilities in leadership structures. Criminal leadership varies across regions due to cultural and socio-political influences. This study compares these models to illustrate how cultural contexts shape leadership effectiveness.

This study underscores the critical impact of leadership on the efficacy, unity, and sustainability of criminal organizations by analyzing psychological characteristics and leadership frameworks. Criminal leaders are not merely prominent personalities; they are the principal agents who orchestrate their groups' activities, influence member conduct, and guarantee the organization's survival in the face of internal strife and foreign threats. An examination of attributes such as courage, brutality, organizational acumen, charisma, and various leadership models—entrepreneurial, prophetic, realist, and social victim—offers a thorough understanding of how these leaders exert influence, foster loyalty, and inspire their groups' criminal endeavors. This section will analyze the wider implications of these findings, investigating the relationship between the psychological traits and structural dynamics of criminal organizations, and emphasizing the challenges and opportunities these leadership models present for law enforcement and crime prevention efforts.

3.1. Leadership traits: The dual-edged sword of fear and loyalty

Courage and violence are essential characteristics that enable leaders to consolidate authority and establish dominance inside criminal organizations (Woodiwiss, 2024). Leaders displaying these characteristics are perceived as bold and authoritative, adept at undertaking risks that others may shun, using ruthlessness to enforce discipline and eliminate adversaries. The duality of heroism and brutality cultivates an environment where followers both venerate and dread the leader.

Establishing hegemony through intimidation and force, however beneficial for immediate power retention, may also yield destabilizing repercussions. The allegiance instilled by these leaders through fear may result in compliance, although it can also cultivate resentment and distrust among subordinates (Qian and Bai, 2024). Members may feel obligated to uphold loyalty due to fear of retribution rather than authentic allegiance, perhaps resulting in internal instability. Conversely, charismatic and authoritative leaders may amalgamate terror with flattery, enhancing members' emotional commitment to both the group's objectives and the leader personally (Edwards, 2012). A leader must strike a balance between terror and loyalty to sustain long-term control over a criminal organization.

Truong Van Cam's circumstances exemplify the intricate equilibrium between coercion and allure. His dependence on extreme violence, demonstrated by the orchestration of his adversaries' deaths, illustrates his readiness to employ cruelty to cement power. Simultaneously, his magnetism enabled him to forge profound emotional connections with his followers, who see him as a guardian in a perilous environment. This amalgamation of fear and respect enabled him to sustain his leadership for extended durations, notwithstanding the perpetual threat of internal treachery or external pressure from law enforcement. The relationship between leaders such as Truong Van Cam and his followers exemplifies a complicated dynamic wherein both coercion and emotional manipulation are crucial for sustaining control.

3.2. Organizational skills: The backbone of criminal operations

Courage and charm are vital psychological traits for managing members; however, organizational skills are fundamental to a criminal leader's capacity to conduct intricate and profitable operations. Leaders who adeptly manage resources, assign responsibilities, and sustain group cohesion are more likely to succeed in high-risk criminal endeavors. The capacity to devise and implement illicit operations, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, or extortion, is largely contingent upon the leader's proficiency in orchestrating activities across various tiers of the organization, frequently while preserving confidentiality and eluding law enforcement oversight.

Truong Van Cam has exhibited exceptional organizational skills in establishing an extensive criminal network connected to corrupt officials and other illicit organizations. His operations were systematically planned, with distinct tasks allocated to different individuals and meticulous oversight of these actions. This strategic acumen and operational

efficacy enabled leaders to sustain a prolonged presence in the criminal underworld by mitigating risk and optimizing revenue.

Nonetheless, even the most adept organizers faced challenges, particularly when illicit operations expanded in scale and intricacy. Large organizations frequently necessitate more stringent frameworks, potentially resulting in internal power conflicts as various individuals vie for dominance (Woodiwiss, 2024). Moreover, as leaders disengaged from the daily operations of the organization, they were compelled to depend on reliable subordinates to execute their responsibilities. This allocation of authority, however essential, also presented the potential for treachery or abandonment. Organizational skills are crucial for managing internal dynamics, ensuring that the leader remains important to decision-making while adeptly overseeing the group's improper acts (Bartley and Daiker, 2022).

3.3. Leadership models: Varied approaches to power and control

Four leadership models—entrepreneurial, prophetic, pragmatic, and social victims demonstrate the many tactics leaders employ to influence and guide their businesses. Each model is shaped by specific psychological reasons and methodologies, offering distinctive perspectives on the dynamics of criminal gangs in various circumstances.

The entrepreneurial model emphasizes profitability and pragmatism. Leaders who follow this methodology, as demonstrated by criminal figures in modern organized crime syndicates, operate their illegal operations akin to traditional corporations (Woodiwiss, 2024). Their focus on financial independence and material achievement affects their decision-making, frequently leading to the amalgamation of legal and illicit activities to safeguard their operations. Nonetheless, this emphasis on monetary profit may result in internal strife, as members can feel disenchanted upon witnessing an inequitable allocation of resources (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2018). Leaders in this paradigm must balance the objective of profit with the necessity of sustaining group loyalty and mitigating conflicts arising from financial competition. The prophetic model encompasses leaders driven by emotional and ideological influences. These leaders evoke profound allegiance and devotion by charm and elevated rhetoric, frequently framing their unlawful actions as integral to a broader cause. This paradigm can cultivate robust emotional bonds among the group, although it may also render the organization more precarious (Muhammad, 2015). Devoted adherents of a prophetic leader may respond unpredictably when the leader's authority is contested, resulting in internal strife or factional divisions. The pragmatist model is characterized by pragmatism and adaptation, with leaders prepared to employ any methods—violence, fraud, or betrayal—to attain their objectives. These leaders thrive in volatile or competitive environments; yet their deficiency in emotional rapport with followers may result in persistent power struggles (Snyder, 2013). In the absence of a robust emotional bond, individuals may be predisposed to resist the leader or defect to rival groups.

The social victim model characterizes leaders who rationalize their unethical conduct as a reaction to societal injustice (Bumiller, 2017). This method is particularly prevalent in marginalized areas, when both leaders and followers encounter sentiments of alienation and discontent. This story promotes societal togetherness and purpose; nevertheless, it also engenders emotional instability, as resentment and fury may result in erratic conduct.

Each model offers a unique framework for comprehending the leader's role inside the organization. Although all criminal leaders must exert control, oversee internal motivation, and uphold loyalty, the methods they employ are profoundly shaped by their individual motives and the attributes of their organization. The variety of leadership styles exemplifies the intricacy of criminal organizations, necessitating leaders to continually adjust to confront internal and external challenges.

3.4. Implications for law enforcement and crime prevention

Analyzing psychological traits and leadership dynamics in criminal organizations has substantial ramifications for criminological theory and law enforcement methods. Analyzing the utilization of courage, violence, charisma, and organizational acumen by leaders to dominate their factions highlights the critical significance of leadership for the success and endurance of criminal organizations. Law enforcement can utilize this information to formulate more focused interventions that extend beyond traditional policing techniques.

A significant impact is the capacity to directly address leadership frameworks. Leaders who depend significantly on fear and violence can foster an environment ripe for internal strife, enabling law enforcement to capitalize on these vulnerabilities by strategic defection or incentivizing cooperation from discontented individuals. Moreover, recognizing several leadership models—entrepreneurial, prophetic, realist, and social victim—enables authorities to customize their intervention strategies according to the leader's specific objectives. For instance, entrepreneurial leaders driven by financial incentives may be scrutinized for financial misconduct, but leaders who depend on emotional connections with their followers may be destabilized by challenging their ideological narratives.

Moreover, concentrating on internal group dynamics enables law enforcement to capitalize on rifts within criminal organizations. Criminal leaders frequently employ psychological manipulation to dominate their followers; conversely, authorities

may utilize analogous psychological tactics to foster tension or mistrust, thereby eroding the leader's authority from within. Moreover, when leaders perceive themselves as victims of social injustice, tackling fundamental issues—such as economic hardship and social inequity—via social interventions might diminish the allure of criminal organizations, particularly among vulnerable groups.

3.5. Limitations

Notwithstanding the valuable insights derived from this study, limitations exist. Although the four leadership models offer a useful foundation, numerous leaders do not rigidly conform to one specific group. Criminal leaders frequently display traits from various models, complicating the anticipation of their conduct and the development of unified measures to dismantle their organizations. Leaders who integrate entrepreneurial and pragmatic traits may require a holistic strategy that encompasses both the financial and operational dimensions of their governance.

Another concern is the context-dependent characteristics of criminal organizations. Effective leadership attributes and styles in one environment may not be relevant in another. Leaders employing great brutality in unstable criminal environments may struggle to retain authority in more stable, economically driven situations. This variety necessitates that law enforcement authorities customize their strategies to the distinct social, cultural, and economic factors affecting criminal group dynamics, hence constraining the capacity to generalize specific findings.

Criminal leaders, particularly those who demonstrate pragmatic and entrepreneurial approaches, exhibit exceptional adaptability, rendering them impervious to external forces. Leaders possessing a pragmatic, survival-oriented mentality typically modify their strategies in reaction to law enforcement interventions, altering ways to safeguard their authority. This adaptability complicates efforts to undermine a leader's authority, as such leaders can swiftly adjust to avoid detection or mitigate risk.

4. Conclusion

The psychological characteristics and leadership styles of criminal group leaders are essential to the success and endurance of criminal organizations, as these leaders employ traits such as courage, brutality, charisma, and organizational skills to sway their followers and maintain their illicit activities. Four leadership paradigms—entrepreneurial, prophetic, pragmatic, and social victim—demonstrate the variety of leadership styles, each possessing distinct advantages and disadvantages. For law enforcement, comprehending these characteristics and patterns presents a substantial opportunity to dismantle organized crime by capitalizing on the psychological vulnerabilities of

leaders and utilizing group dynamics for more efficient intervention. It is essential to recognize the constraints of this methodology, encompassing the variety of leadership styles, the context-specific traits of criminal organizations, and the adaptability of their leaders. Subsequent research ought to rectify these deficiencies by gathering more comprehensive data and examining the interplay of these attributes with wider societal issues. A thorough comprehension of criminal leadership equips law enforcement with the necessary tools to deconstruct these groups, ultimately reducing their societal influence and promoting more effective crime prevention.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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