



“Wanted: Mafia boss” – essay on the personology of organized crime

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Abstract. Despite an abundance of mafia romanticism both in literary form and in social science the psychological study of personality of prominent organized crime figures is almost completely absent. Criminological attempts to understand how the mafia kingpin’s mind works have failed so far because they are based on the mistaken view that underworld leadership would not require a certain level of skills and knowledge. Thus I have constructed a theoretical portrait of a maffia boss using the Five Factor Personality Model that is also used for personal selection purposes. I then suggest that personality traits that predict leadership success in the legitimate business world such as extraversion, controlled impulsiveness, a sense of adventure, megalomania, and Narcissistic Personality Disorder, are all equally suitable traits for a career in organized crime.

‘I have a certain amount of experience, you know,’ Don Mariano went on. ‘I like to divide what we call humanity – and that is quite a mouthful, “humanity,” a beautiful windy word – into five categories: the people, the semi-people, the little people and, if you don’t mind, the suckers and the ducks . . . real people are few and far between, the semi-people are a bit less rare. I would be very happy if humanity confined itself to this level. But no, it goes another step down to the little people, they are like children who think they are already grown up, monkeys that make the same motions as adults . . . And then another step down there are the suckers, there is a whole army of them . . . and at the bottom the quackers who really ought to live like ducks in a pond, because that is about as much meaning as their lives have, no more important than duck’s lives . . .’

Leonardo Sciascia, *The Day of the Owl*

Criminal sciences on underworld leadership

Aspects of organized crime have been studied by a large variety of disciplines: sociology, history, cultural anthropology, economy and political science. So far psychology is almost entirely absent.¹ This is surprising because if the concept of organized crime is something meaningful cross culturally and historically one would expect that the personality type of the people who are attracted to leadership positions would constitute one of its constant features.

Is there something distinct in the psychological make-up of crime chieftains so diverse as mafia capo Totò Riina in Sicily, Japan's Boryokudan (Yakuza) organizer Kazuo Taoka, cartel leader Pablo Escobar in Medellin, Colombia, Turkey's mafia baba Dündar Kilic, Burma's war lord and king of heroin Khun Sa, La Cosa Nostra prominents in the US such as Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky and all the other infamous as well as illustrious godfathers in their respective countries? If there is, which personality characteristics or specific combinations thereof are there that make crime bosses differ from other professional groups or criminal types?

A quick scan through the forensic behavioral literature does not provide even the slightest hint as to which direction to look in for evidence to render credibility to the supposition.² The recent comprehensive textbook in "criminal profiling" edited by Brent Turvey³ offers descriptions of arsonists, serial rapists, individuals who practise cyberstalking and other uncanny individuals, but not of any variety of organized criminals. Reports made by clinical psychiatrists about distinct criminal categories are typically about murderers, fraudsters and shoplifters, but not on gangsters. Mafia bosses seem to be too professional or too little pathological to be interesting for behavioral scientists to study.

Unexpectedly, the same holds true for mafia biographies. A whole series of such life histories that has been analyzed by Firestone (1993)⁴, reveals much about the subculture of the underworld and the organizational features of criminal groups but very little about the individual psychology of its members. Mafia memoirs are full of romantic anecdotes and descriptions of eccentric demeanor, but as psychological portraits most of them are surprisingly flat. Even a relatively simple question about the intelligence level of criminal bosses cannot be answered on the basis of these criminal life histories. Many biographers, most of them journalists, relate in passing that their principal character is unusually intelligent although not in the Conventional Meaning of the term. Such remarks are either signs of surprise (how "shrewd and wise" is he shown to be!) or attempts to pump up the stature of their leading figure. Lacey (1991) is about the only writer to belittle his subject Meyer Lansky, "the little man".⁵ But it is indeed hard to believe that the wizard of the mafia Lansky, gambling genius "The Brain" Arnold Rothstein or the great organizer Luciano were not clever, but on the other hand the mob has also brought forth unbelievable numskulls and uninhibited roughs who have reached their position in the mafia only by their swank and daring.

It all depends of course on how intelligence is defined and what intelligence tests measure. The famous American gangster of the forties and fifties, Frank Costello, could hardly live with his tested IQ of 97 and turned to a psycho-analyst for help.⁶ Chicago boss Sam Giancana did not score higher