Reasonably Enraged
Cormac D. McAdams
cormac.mcadams@tufts.edu

Research Motivation
Study the historic and ongoing interaction between psychological sciences and the criminal law. Intuitions about human behavior and mental states are often inconsistent, differ across individuals, and are prone to biases and prejudice. While the function of law is a normative question decided by society, psychological sciences will contribute to resolving long-existing problems and improving the justice system.

Mental States & Provocation
In many instances, mens rea or the “criminal mind” is required for a full criminal conviction. This precedent allows mitigating factors that negatively affect cognition, memory, physical control, or one’s grasp on reality, to be taken into account to reduce sentences. Provocation is a defense wherein individuals, who are induced to extreme emotional or mental distress, and act violently during the distressed state, are charge more leniently than in the absence of such conditions. Yet, this subjective experience of extreme disturbance must have a "reasonable explanation or excuse," determined by an outside person imaging themselves in the actor’s shoes. Accordingly, a person may be so enraged or distressed to commit murder, but must be in control enough to remain reasonably constrained.

Case Study: People v. Spurlin
Facts: In 1982, Richard Spurlin and his wife Peggy engaged in a drunken argument regarding their mutual infidelities. That night, in a fit of rage, Richard murder his wife and their son Scott. Richard, however, could not murder his daughter Carrie, deciding to flee the state with her under an assumed name.
Decision: Convicted of first-degree murder of son, Scott, and second-degree murder of wife, Peggy.
Upheled at Appeal: Richard argued that the murder of his son should have been found as second-degree as well. The court did not agree. Since Scott was not a causal part of his father’s distress, his murder was beyond the scope of provocation. Also, Richard retrieved a new weapon between the two murders, which indicates planning as well as time wherein he could have "cooled off."

Psychology of Self-Control and Rage
- Neurological mechanisms related to emotional control and decision making abilities can be located in the prefrontal cortex.
- Neurological systems can be damaged or may vary from person to person due to genetics or one’s environment.
- Many types of impulse disorders, including the inability to control violent outbursts, have been characterized by psychiatric professionals.
- The study of intense emotions on reasoning, judgements, and decisions is ongoing and will be elucidating.

Justification
- A category of defense which focuses on the wrongfulness of an action.
- Acknowledges and maintains individual’s responsibility and agency.
- Determines that individual was not wholly wrong in what they did and may have even been right.
- "She was justified!"

Excuse
- A category of defense which focuses on how guilty an individual was.
- Takes into account individual’s decisional capacities.
- Recognizes that the action was wholly wrong, but still forgive the individual.
- "Don’t worry, you’re excused."

Which better describes the defense of provocation?

Selected Bibliography