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Can psychology explain why some people are more prone to crime?

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Abstract

This paper examines two particular mental practices including psychodynamic, Neuroscience, and Social Learning speculations about criminal way of behaving. Right off the bat, this paper characterizes wrongdoing in the illumination of its encompassing debates, and afterward it examines the hypothetical places of each of the previously mentioned approaches, as well as how they would make sense of criminal way of behaving. It is found in this paper that in spite of the smart commitments of current mental speculations concerning criminal way of behaving, one must likewise consider that the actual meaning of wrongdoing as a develop may represent a few challenges with regards to draw deductions between mental variables and criminal way of behaving.

The issue of human violence is also a major topic within the academic discipline of psychology. As biosocial theorists do, psychologists focus on how individual characteristics may interact with the social environment to produce a violent event. However, rather than focus on the biological basis of crime, psychologists focus on how mental processes impact individual propensities for violence. Psychologists are often interested in the association between learning, intelligence, and personality and aggressive behaviour. In this section of the report, we briefly review some of the major psychological perspectives that have attempted to explain violent behaviour. These perspectives include the psychodynamic perspective, behavioural theory, cognitive theory and personality theory. We will also explore the possible relationship between mental illness and violence.

The Psychodynamic Perspective

The psychodynamic perspective is largely based on the groundbreaking ideas of Sigmund Freud. A detailed discussion of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this report. It is sufficient to note that Freud thought that human behaviour, including violent behaviour, was the product of "unconscious" forces operating within a person's mind. Freud also felt that early childhood experiences had a profound impact on adolescent and adult behaviour. Freud, for

example, believed that conflicts that occur at various psychosexual stages of development might impact an individual's ability to operate normally as an adult (Bartol, 2002). For Freud, aggression was thus a basic (idbased) human impulse that is repressed in well-adjusted people who have experienced a normal childhood. However, if the aggressive impulse is not controlled, or is repressed to an unusual degree, some aggression can "leak out" of the unconscious and a person can engage in random acts of violence. Freud referred to this as "displaced aggression" (see Englander, 2007; Bartol, 2002).

It is interesting to note that Freud himself did not theorize much about crime or violence. The psychoanalyst who is perhaps most closely associated with the study of criminality is August Aichorn. Unlike many of the sociologists of his day, Aichorn felt that exposure to stressful social environments did not automatically produce crime or violence. After all, most people are exposed to extreme stress and do not engage in serious forms of criminality. Aichorn felt that stress only produced crime in those who had a particular mental state known as latent delinquency. Latent delinquency, according to Aichorn, results from inadequate childhood socialization and manifests itself in the need for immediate gratification (impulsivity), a lack of empathy for others, and the inability to feel guilt (Aichorn, 1935).

Since Aichorn's early work, psychoanalysts have come to view violent criminals as "id-dominated" individuals who are unable to control their impulsive, pleasure-seeking drives (Toch, 1979). Often because of childhood neglect or abuse, violence-prone individuals suffer from weak or damaged "egos" that render them unable to deal with stressful circumstances within conventional society. It is also argued that youth with weak egos are immature and easily led into crime and violence by deviant peers (Andrews and Bonta, 1994). In their most extreme form, underdeveloped egos (or superegos) can lead to "psychosis" and the inability to feel sympathy for the victims of crime (see DiNapoli, 2002; Seigel and McCormick, 2006). In sum, psychodynamic theories depict the violent offender as an impulsive, easily frustrated person who is dominated by events or issues that occurred in early childhood.

The most significant criticism of the psychoanalytic perspective is that it is based on information derived from therapists' subjective interpretations of interviews with a very small number of patients (see Englander, 2007). In other words, the theory has not yet been subject to rigorous scientific verification. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that basic psychodynamic principles

have had a major impact on the subsequent development of criminological thought. For example, many other theories of violence have come to stress the importance of the family and early childhood experiences. Similarly, a number of sociological and criminological theories stress that violent criminals are impulsive and lack empathy for others (see the discussion of self-control theory below). Many of these theories are discussed in upcoming sections of this report.

Behavioural Theories

Behaviour theory maintains that all human behaviour – including violent behaviour – is learned through interaction with the social environment. Behaviourists argue that people are not born with a violent disposition. Rather, they learn to think and act violently as a result of their day-to-day experiences (Bandura, 1977). These experiences, proponents of the behaviourist tradition maintain, might include observing friends or family being rewarded for violent behaviour, or even observing the glorification of violence in the media. Studies of family life, for example, show that aggressive children often model the violent behaviours of their parents. Studies have also found that people who live in violent communities learn to model the aggressive behaviour of their neighbours (Bartol, 2002).

Behavioural theorists have argued that the following four factors help produce violence: 1) a stressful event or stimulus – like a threat, challenge or assault – that heightens arousal; 2) aggressive skills or techniques learned through observing others; 3) a belief that aggression or violence will be socially rewarded (by, for example, reducing frustration, enhancing self-esteem, providing material goods or earning the praise of other people); and 4) a value system that condones violent acts within certain social contexts. Early empirical tests of these four principles were promising (Bartol, 2002). As a result, behavioural theory directly contributed to the development of social learning theories of deviance (differential association theory, sub-cultural theory, neutralization theory, etc.). These theories, among the most important and influential of all criminological theories, are subject to a detailed discussion in the section of this report entitled Social Learning and Violence (see below).

Cognitive Development and Violence

Cognitive theorists focus on how people perceive their social environment and learn to solve problems. The moral and intellectual development perspective is the branch of cognitive theory

that is most associated with the study of crime and violence. Piaget (1932) was one of the first psychologists to argue that people's reasoning abilities develop in an orderly and logical fashion. He argued that, during the first stage of development (the sensor-motor stage), children respond to their social environment in a simple fashion by focusing their attention on interesting objects and developing their motor skills. By the final stage of the development (the formal operations stage), children have developed into mature adults who are capable of complex reasoning and abstract thought.

Kohlberg (1969) applied the concept of moral development to the study of criminal behaviour. He argued that all people travel through six different stages of moral development. At the first stage, people only obey the law because they are afraid of punishment. By the sixth stage, however, people obey the law because it is an assumed obligation and because they believe in the universal principles of justice, equity, and respect for others. In his research, Kohlberg found that violent youth were significantly lower in their moral development than non-violent youth – even after controlling for social background (Kohlberg et al., 1973). Since his pioneering efforts, studies have consistently found that people who obey the law simply to avoid punishment (i.e., out of self-interest) are more likely to commit acts of violence than are people who recognize and sympathize with the fundamental rights of others. Higher levels of moral reasoning, on the other hand, are associated with acts of altruism, generosity and non-violence (Veneziano and Veneziano, 1992). In sum, the weight of the evidence suggests that people with lower levels of moral reasoning will engage in crime and violence when they think they can get away with it. On the other hand, even when presented with the opportunity, people with higher levels of moral reasoning will refrain from criminal behaviour because they think it is wrong.

Personality and Violence

The psychological concept of “personality” has been defined as stable patterns of behaviour, thoughts or actions that distinguish one person from another (see Seigel and McCormick, 2006: 180). A number of early criminologists argued that certain personality types are more prone to criminal behaviour. The Gluecks (Glueck and Glueck, 1950), for example, identified a number of personality traits that they felt were associated with violence, including self-assertiveness, defiance, extroversion, narcissism and suspicion. More recently, researchers have linked violent behaviours to traits such as hostility, egoism, self-centredness, spitefulness, jealousy, and

indifference to or lack of empathy for others. Criminals have also been found to lack ambition and perseverance, to have difficulty controlling their tempers and other impulses, and to be more likely than conventional people are to hold unconventional beliefs (see Atkins, 2007; Capara et al., 2007; Costello and Dunaway 2003; Johnson et al., 2000; Sutherland and Shepard, 2002; Miller and Lynam, 2001).

The Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) have frequently been used to assess the personality characteristics of young people. The use of these scales has consistently produced a statistically significant relationship between certain personality characteristics and criminal behaviour. Adolescents who are prone to violence typically respond to frustrating events or situations with strong negative emotions. They often feel stressed, anxious and irritable in the face of adverse social conditions. Psychological testing also suggests that crime-prone youth are also impulsive, paranoid, aggressive, hostile, and quick to take action against perceived threats (Avshalom et al., 1994).

There is considerable debate about the causal direction of the personality-violence association. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that there is a direct causal link between certain personality traits and criminal behaviour. However, others maintain that personality characteristics interact with other factors to produce crime and violence. For example, defiant, impulsive youth often have less-than-stellar educational and work histories. Poor education and employment histories subsequently block opportunities for economic success. These blocked opportunities, in turn, lead to frustration, deprivation, and ultimately, criminal activity (Miller and Lynam, 2001).

Psychopathy and Violence

Research suggests that some serious violent offenders may have a serious personality defect commonly known as psychopathy, sociopathy or anti-social personality disorder. Psychopaths are impulsive, have low levels of guilt and frequently violate the rights of others. They have been described as egocentric, manipulative, cold-hearted, forceful, and incapable of feeling anxiety or remorse over their violent actions. Psychopaths are also said to be able to justify their actions to themselves so that they always appear to be reasonable and justified.

Considering these negative personality traits, it is perhaps not surprising that recent studies show that psychopaths are significantly more prone to violence compared with the normal population. Furthermore, the research evidence also suggests that psychopaths often continue with their criminal careers long after others have aged out of crime. It has been estimated that approximately 30 per cent of all prison inmates in the United States are psychopaths. More recent projections, however, place this estimate closer to ten per cent. However, psychopaths are particularly over-represented among chronic offenders. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 80 per cent of chronic offenders exhibit psychopathic personalities. In sum, research suggests that psychopaths have a significantly higher likelihood of violence than others do. However, experts also stress that not all psychopaths become violent. In fact, the majority of people convicted of violent crimes in Canada and the US do not have a psychopathic personality (see reviews in Edens et al., 2001; Lykken, 1996).

Mental Illness and Violence

A recent survey of more than 6,000 respondents from 14 countries found that approximately ten per cent of the adult population suffers from some form of mental illness – ranging from depression to schizophrenia (Seigel and McCormick, 2006). Rates of mental illness may be even higher among youth. For example, one study found that one in five children and adolescents residing in Ontario suffer from a significant mental health disorder.¹ Leschied (2007) notes that cross-national research has also documented a 20 per cent mental illness rate among children between zero and 16 years of age. The most common disorders among youth include depression, substance abuse and conduct disorder (Osenblatt, 2001). Research also suggests that mental health issues may put young people at risk of engaging in violent behaviour. For example, after an extensive review of the literature, Monohan (2000: 112) noted that “[n]o matter how many social and demographic factors are statistically taken into account, there appears to be a greater than chance relationship between mental disorder and violent behaviour. Mental disorder is a statistically significant risk factor for the occurrence of violence.”

Research suggests that depression, a relatively common disorder among youth, may be related to aggression. For example, one recent study documented that affective disorders are related to aggression at both home and school. This study is important because other studies have found a

link between depression and both property crime and substance use, but not violence (see Englander, 2007). However, the authors of this study do note that they only focused on minor forms of aggression, not serious violence (Pliszka et al., 2000). Interestingly, a number of studies have found that while minor depression is related to an increased probability of minor criminality, major bipolar depression is not at all related to serious violent behaviour. Indeed, major depression may be too crippling a disorder to permit someone to form intent and act out in a violent manner (see Modestin et al., 1997). Similarly, some experts have suggested that youth suffering from affective disorders are actually more likely to withdraw and harm themselves than to act violently towards others (Hillbrand, 1994).

Additional research suggests that particular types of mental illness – including schizophrenia – are more associated with violent behaviour than others are (see Lescheid, 2007). For example, people who suffer from paranoid delusions that others are trying to harm them, or feel that their minds are being controlled by outside forces, are more vulnerable to periodic episodes of rage and violence than are those who do not have these symptoms (Monahan, 1996; Berenbaun and Fujita, 1994). Studies have also found that up to 75 of juvenile murderers suffer from some form of mental illness – including psychopathy and schizophrenia (Rosner, 1979; Sorrells, 1977). Another study followed 1,000 English children from birth to their 21st birthday and found that only two per cent of the sample met the DSM-III diagnostic criteria for mental illness. However, this two per cent was responsible for 50 per cent of the violent incidents that were documented during the study period (see Arsenaault et al., 2000).

In sum, research gives tentative support for the idea that mental disturbance or illness may be a root or underlying cause of violent behaviour. It is extremely important to note, however, that some scholars suggest that this relationship may be spurious. In other words, the same social conditions that produce violent behaviour – including parental neglect, child abuse, violent victimization, racism, peer pressure and poverty – may also cause mental illness (for discussions about the co-morbidity of violence and mental illness see Durant et al., 2007; Leischied, 2007). Studies also suggest that most people with severe mental illnesses do not engage in serious violence or criminality (Cirincione et al., 1991). It is also interesting to observe that, at the

societal level, rates of violent crime have actually decreased at the same time that mentally ill populations have been de-institutionalized.

A Note on Substance Abuse and Violence

Substance abuse – including alcoholism – has now been formally recognized as a mental illness. Research has also established that there is a strong positive correlation between levels of substance abuse and violence. For example, a Corrections Canada survey of over 6,000 inmates, many of them violent offenders, found that 48 per cent admitted to using illegal drugs at the time of their offence (Seigel and McCormick, 2006). Similarly, a recent US study found that over 80 per cent of people arrested for violent crimes tested positive for illegal drugs at the time of their apprehension (Feucht, 1996). Furthermore, numerous cross-national surveys of prison inmates reveal that the vast majority were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of their offence (Innes, 1988).

It is hypothesized that alcohol and drugs can impact violence in three ways. First of all, alcohol and drugs may have psychopharmacological effects that impair cognition and subsequently increase the likelihood of aggressive behaviour. Many have argued, for example, that the physiological impact of substance use serves to reduce social inhibitions and thus frees or enables people to act on their violent impulses. Others, however, have argued that this “disinhibition effect” is culturally specific. Anthropologists have shown, for example, that the social effects of alcohol vary dramatically from country to country. In some nations, alcohol intoxication is related to violence, in others it is not. Is it possible that the effect of alcohol and drugs are socially defined? In some societies, people may come to believe that there is a strong relationship between intoxication and violence. If so, some people may come to use alcohol and drugs as an excuse or justification for their violent behaviour. Studies do suggest that people are more forgiving of people who engage in violent acts while intoxicated and are less forgiving of people who engage in violence while sober (see review in White, 2004).

Conclusion

Crime has been a constant problem ever since the beginning of existence of human civilization and efforts to tackle with this problem have not yet succeeded. There is no society which is not having the problem of crime and criminality. According to Emile Durkheim, crime is a natural phenomenon which is constantly changing with the social change and even society which has angelic characters will face crime. Criminologists have always differed in their view regarding crime causation. Continental criminologists have support the endogenous theory of criminality which is rounded on bio-physical consideration of criminals. The American criminologists on the other hand, are more inclined to explain criminality in terms of social constantly changing with the social change. Psychologists too have conducted in-depth studies on the concept of crime and criminality and associated crime in terms of personality deviations.

Psychology is the study of mind, actions and attitudes of humans. It is the study of distinct attributes of an individual such as personality, thought, discernments, intellect, imagination, creativity etc. Psychologists view crime as a behaviour that is learnt by an individual during the course of his contacts with various persons. They try to elucidate and study crime in terms of environmental settings.

Criminal psychology has often held the view that some individuals are more prone to committing crime. They are of the belief that psychologically disturbed criminals who commit more crime because of their mental depravity or emotional stability. Further, they also hold the view that apart from psychological factors, sociological factors such as less education, unskilled labours, and poor sanitation facilities can create inferiority complex and the ultimate result is that they try to overcome their shortcomings by unrealistic self-assertions and lend into criminality.

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