Why People Commit Crimes: Theoretical Explanations

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Abstract. The reasons behind criminal behavior and the impacts on individual developmental outcomes are important research questions in the field of criminal psychology. Researchers often investigate the causes of individual criminal behavior by examining both individual characteristics and environmental factors. This study explores, from a theoretical perspective, why people engage in criminal activities. Four theories of human behavior seek to explain the decision-making process behind criminal actions. Among these, the rational choice theory stands out with its emphasis on cost-benefit analysis. This approach suggests that individuals commonly base their decisions on a weighing of potential costs and benefits. However, certain factors, like low self-control, can significantly disrupt one's ability to focus on the decision's elements, potentially causing an undue fixation on perceived benefits. Amidst the increasing complexity of human interactions, the social learning theory highlights the impact of delinquent individuals on the general populace. Factors such as media exposure, obedience to authority, and the loss of individual identity in group settings are shown to wield considerable influence. Delving into the intricacies of human personality and emotions, the trait-state approach zeroes in on individual disparities and adopts a dynamic perspective. Furthermore, contemporary law enforcement plays a significant role in maintaining public order, with punitive measures targeting offending conduct. This aligns with the deterrence theory's emphasis on the pivotal role of punishment and the perceived costs that individuals weigh when contemplating criminal acts.

Keywords: Criminal behavior, rational choice theory, social learning theory, trait-state model, deterrence hypothesis.

1. Introduction

Preventing crime is a crucial part of maintaining social order. Crime can be caused by chemical abuse. Gambling and abusive childhood can also lead to violent behavior. Innate distinctive phenotypes also predispose people to crime. This study explores causes of crime in the criminal decision-making approach. During the process of making decision, several factors can exert control and contribute to individual's final decision. The rational choice theory views criminal decision making in an economic perspective along with individualism. Individuals typically weigh the benefits and costs associated with their actions, but what motivates some people to engage in actions where the costs outweigh the benefits? This could be due to the individual's level of self-control. Children develop self-control to balance their id and superego, in other words, developing long-term gratification. Long term gratification contributes positively to criminal decision making, and studies have shown perpetrators consider benefits (which show they satisfy from short term gratification) as more valuable than ordinary individuals. Certain types of crime are developed from imitation, as proposed by the social learning theory. Whether its copycat crime from media exposure, father's influence in violent behavior, or delinquent peers, social influence are crucial to alter one's perception of violent behaviors from dangerous to beneficial. Sons learn violent behavior through accidental eyewitness of domestic violence. Students learn violent behaviors by witnessing physical bullying. People with an inclination to commit crime are emotionally affected by crime news on media platforms. Social influences in every direction have effect on criminal decision making. Criminal decision making involve two basic modes, hot and cold, which are influenced by emotions and personality difference among individuals. Emotions make people impulsive and fail to consider the long run. Making instant decisions that yield grave consequences are often resulted by emotions such as anger and hate. Exploration of personality also contributed to understanding of criminal decision

making. Conscientiousness and agreeableness in the five-factor model correlates with individual's consideration of risk and punishment. Honesty-humility and emotionality also contribute to different perception of cost and fear. The last thing of criminal behavior is punishment. Punishments are accounted into the cost of offending behavior, and lawmakers increase the cost by increasing the severity, certainty, and celerity of punishments. Lawmakers often predict criminals to care the most about severity, but certainty is the true determining factor. Escape from legal punishment gives individuals a second time. Criminals then consider the severity, which have effect if and only if individuals are aware of the punishments they will receive and their behavior are not triggered by impulsivity.

2. The theoretical explanations for Criminal Decision Making

2.1. Rational Choice Theory

Economists believe that individuals make economic decisions through cost-benefit analysis. Criminals also compare the cost with gains of actions and make decisions accordingly. This approach of criminal decision making is based on rational choice theory, people's action to weight cost and benefit of committing a crime and choose the option with benefit outweighing the penalty. This theory is developed from individualism, which believes that individuals are unrestricted to make their own decisions.

Studies have found low self-control as an important factor in rational choice theory. People lacking self-control perceive less cost and more benefit to criminal behaviors, making them more likely to commit crime than people with more self-control. Two factors regarding low self-control contribute to their perception of lower cost and more benefit. People lacking self-control make decisions according to short-term benefits. They satisfy from short term gratification, while people with high self-control tend to participate in actions that build up to long term gratification. Additionally, the former also evaluate the negative consequences of their actions only in short term; they fail to consider the severity of their action in the long term, which the latter would consider. People with low self-control also tend to be more impulsive, reckless, and short-sighted. In other words, researchers hypothesize that the motivation for people to practice criminal behavior is partly resulted from low self-control.

In several studies comparing non-offenders and offenders, data has shown that offenders are more likely to be affected by variation in estimation of cost and benefit. Offenders also overestimate the benefit of different criminal behavior while underestimating cost of these behavior. A study in 2008 has found significant difference in feeling of guilt by offenders and college students. 30% more college students claim to feel guilty if they participate in shoplifting [1].

In another study, five-hundred sixteen voluntary Chinese juvenile offenders involved and two crime scenarios were created: shoplifting and physical fight. Volunteers record their probability of participating in both cases with a range of 0-100. Later, the cost and benefit of both scenarios were analyzed with several factors, and volunteers also identified and rated importance of each factor by individually. Results show that offenders are more inclined to participate in the physical fight than in shoplifting; they believe the cost associated with shoplifting is higher than its benefit. The analysis of probability of shoplifting and perceived benefit found statically significant relationship. The cost related factors of shoplifting scenario do not contribute to higher probability of shoplifting. This result suggests that offenders make decisions by evaluating the action's benefit more than its cost. In other words, increase in benefit will attract more people to commit crimes, but not as obvious if decrease in cost. Moreover, significant increase in low self-control is also highly associated with the probability of participating in criminal behavior. Along with low self-control, probability of offending also is associated with delinquent peers. Having a delinquent peer nearby may increase the person's intent to offend. With peers involving in shoplifting, people may be more inclined to commit that kind of crime. This influence is related to the concept social learning theory [2].

2.2. Social Learning Theory

Human are gregarious animals. We live in groups and we need to communicate with our fellows. Throughout the interactions with peers, we imbue them with our emotion personalities, and habits. They do too. These interactions also play a role in crime cases. Humans learn in various ways. The most common ways are observational learning and associative learning. Observational learning is where people learn simply by observing others behavior. Others serve as a model, sometimes also called modeling. Although observing other's behavior help one to learn effectively, it can also lead to adoption of criminal behavior through observation of peers participating in crime. The concept of social learning theory under crime context proposes that "crime and conformity are learned through interactions with other people that expose the individual to definitions and behaviors, reinforcements, and role models that either favor or oppose crime." In short, criminal behavior increases as the interaction between one individual and criminal models increases; the individual's definition of crime contains more rewards than cost.

Association with offenders can directly affect an individual's perception of the benefit and cost of criminal behavior, reinforcement from victims and imitation can also indirectly affect criminal behavior. The differential association explanation of offending suggests the idea that individuals learn the attitudes and values people associate to criminal behaviors through interactions with these people. One example is criminal victimization. Exposure to both violent partner and victims or violences encourages victimization and offending behaviors. For example, consider a scenario where a young child becomes a witness to his father's physical abuse towards his mother, leaving the child deeply frightened by the traumatic event. However, the child might adopt a positive attitude towards violence and perceive it as an effective way to solve problems. Therefore, when confronted with issues, they are more likely to lean towards using violence as a means of resolution.

Apart from influences nearby, individuals can also be affected by violent behaviors online. Mass shootings and random murders by poison have mostly appeared one following another, phenomena known as copycat crime. The effect of media can be disastrous. Individuals can be informed of the idea about the process of committing crime through news of previous crimes. Media coverages informs individuals how much media exposure they can receive if they commit those crimes too. Even if not with an intention to commit crime, individuals that are less emotionally developed can easily be affected to commit crime by mimicking those exposed on TVs or the internet.

Peer influence also plays a significant role in criminal behavior. Individuals want to be approved by their peers and maintain a strong relationship with them. On a particular occasion, if an individual's friend collaborates in shoplifting and convinces the individual that joining them would make them "true friends," a dilemma arises. Fearing the potential disapproval of his peers and the consequences of getting caught, the individual finds himself torn, ultimately opting to comply. This decision is fueled by his desire to maintain the only friendships he has. Such associations can also play a role in fostering criminal behaviors, aligning with the principles of the social learning theory.

Additionally, a concept known as de-individualization within groups of individuals also increase the learning of criminal behaviors with peers. When people are within a group, single individual de-individualizes and become anonymous. As a result, people tend to feel less guilty if they mimic others and commit crime. They diffuse their responsibility to other individuals, and so they are comfortable to commit crime. This diffusion of responsibility along with presence of offenders nearby attracts individuals' interest to commit crime. This all reflects the mechanisms of social learning [3].

Researchers surveyed about 73000 adolescents from grades 7 to 12. Subjects were asked whether they had engaged in offense, whether their friends have engaged, and more detailed questions such as "how often do you go out at night" By separating participants into three groups, committed crime alone, with friends, or never, researchers were able to find association between peer influence and criminal behavior. In the presence of confounding variables that can possibly affect the results, researchers compared the non-situational effect to the total effect to reduce the possibility of situational effect on the results. Behaviors are made sure not to be caused by specific environment or circumstances. Results show that adolescents mostly commit crime with peers, with 85% committing

burglary and vandalism, 50% committing purse snatch and assault. Although there are differences between the types of crime committed among different genders, both genders are the same likely to commit crimes. Data show the association between peer delinquency and criminal behavior had a correlation coefficient range of 0.09-0.20, which reflects the influence of negative peers, consistent with the perspective of social learning theory [4].

2.3. Personality and Trait-State Model

Trait based, emotion, and cognition influences also play a role in criminal decision making. Individual's perception of apprehension may be a large factor of whether they choose to commit the crime or not. Findings suggests that people who self-reported delinquent behaviors do not perceive any risk of being punished or feel anxious after their behavior. Emotions are also crucial in criminal decision making. Participants with fairly better moods tend to think less about delinquent behaviors.

The hot mode operates based on instant and intuitive decisions, often influenced by the present moment and situational factors. These decisions are made in the heat of the moment, with the consequences becoming evident later on. For instance, specific emotions like anger can diminish an individual's perception of the costs of their actions, potentially leading them to make decisions that result in criminal behavior. Conversely, feelings of fear and anticipation of punishment amplify the perceived costs of committing crimes, prompting individuals to exercise greater caution when it comes to delinquent behaviors. Likewise, the perception of potential benefits can be swayed by an individual's intense emotions and sudden outbursts. As an illustration, if a person decides to take the life of someone who had murdered their parents years ago, the intense feelings of hatred will skew their perception of the benefits of carrying out the act.

The cold mode operates based on rational choice theory, minimizing the influence of immediate emotions. In this mode of decision-making, economists often employ the SWOT analysis technique, which involves listing out strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. These factors are then compared, along with their potential future consequences, before arriving at a final decision. Furthermore, when we contemplate purchasing luxury items or products that strongly attract us, it is often wiser to set aside impulsiveness and consider the benefits of such purchases. Opting for immediate purchases can trigger thoughts like "I shouldn't spend money on this" or "there's a much better option out there." Therefore, a more prudent approach involves adopting the cold mode of thinking when evaluating choices. [5].

There are several models regarding the personality aspect of criminal decision making. The Five Factor Model (FFM), also known as the Big Five personality traits, measures and build up our understanding of variations in human personality. It evaluates personality by five aspects: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Openness measures a person's willingness to experience unconventional events. Conscientiousness measures whether the individual is organized, disciplined, and has clear objectives. Extraversion assesses the individual's outgoingness and the gaining of energy from socializing. Introverts prefer more solitary settings and less social interactions. Agreeableness measures the individual's cooperativity and ability to empathize with others. High agreeableness often means the individual makes a good team member and considers others' opinions. Neuroticism measures one's emotional stability. Researchers utilize the FFM to assess personality traits, predict behavior, and explore how these traits influence life outcomes. In the case of crimes, this model can be used to predict criminal behavior and how traits affect people's perception and decision making [6]. Findings conclude that agreeableness and conscientiousness associate with criminal behavior. People with low agreeableness are easily angered and hostile. Impatience and loss of temper take over fearfulness and empathy. As a result, they have lower threshold for what is considered wrong. Lack of fearfulness encourages people to make risky decisions and experience less negative consequence as a result. Fearfulness and empathy are both feelings that may influence individuals to reconsider their attempts. On the other hand, people low on conscientiousness are often impulsive in making decisions and do not consider long term consequences [7].

In addition to FFM, the HEXACO (Six-factor) model provides a deeper dive into specific personality traits, addressing cultural variation and enriching our understanding of human personality diversity. This model adds two additional traits, honesty-humility and emotionality. Honesty-Humility assesses individual's "tendency to be interpersonally genuine, to avoid fraud and corruption, to be uninterested in status and wealth, to be modest and unassuming, and the reluctance to take advantage of others to satisfy one's own needs." [5] Emotionality evaluates emotional sensitivity [7].

People with low emotionality are less fearful, less anxious, and have less empathy towards others. They have low emotion sensitivity and perceive less emotion from others. Consequently, they are less likely to imagine future consequences associated with the behavior. If they do, they will be less disposed to do it. High score in honesty-humility indicates individuals have the ability to detect opportunities for others to commit crimes. They also tend to view consequences of criminal behavior under society's context and care more about the overall effect. Hence, these approaches make people less inclined to to such behavior. The results are all concluded from the following study [8]. A study involving 495 participants tested the relationship between personality and criminal choice with four scenarios. Independent and dependent variables were measured by questionnaires: perceived risk, negative state effect, HEXACO, and criminal choice. Perceived risks measures how likely and how serious individuals think if they choose to do the criminal behavior in each scenario. Negative state effect measures the insecurity and negative feelings individuals feel if they decide to commit offensive behavior. All variables are measured with scores and analyzed by bivariate analysis. Results show strong correlation between honesty-humility, agreeableness, conscientiousness, perceived risk, negative state, and criminal choice. Criminal choice correlates negatively with honesty-humility, agreeableness, conscientiousness, perceived risk, and negative state affect. Honesty-humility and emotionality directly associates with criminal choice. Additionally, it also directly affects perceived risk and negative state affect, which then directly associate with criminal choice. Although not mentioned in the five-factor model, honesty-humility seems to be the personality that correlates with criminal choice the most compared to other factors of personality. Thus, this study not only conclude the importance of different personality factors on criminal decision making, but also the effectiveness of the HEXACO personality inventory on our understanding of crime and personality [8].

2.4. Deterrence Theory

The history of Deterrence Theory stretches to Bentham's theory that humans experience pain and pleasure. Nevertheless, humans choose actions that can increase their pleasure and minimize their pain. The motivation to do each action is to receive advantage or prevent pain. "The economic model of deterrence suggests that most crimes are committed by rational people who consider whether committing a crime is worth the risk of potential punishment (deterrence hypothesis) With punishment attached to each kind of criminal behavior, people weight the severity, certainty, and celerity each punishment. The theory believes that people tend to commit crimes that have low risk of punishment, whether its low severity, low possibility of being caught, or long duration of time before real punishment. Although all three components determine the risk of criminal behavior, certainty of punishment is the most important factor individuals consider while making criminal choices [9].

The economic theory of deterrence hypothesizes that individuals make criminal decisions according to its repercussions. Heavy penalties associated with criminal behavior should dissuade people from committing the crime. Individuals who imagine them being punished after they commit such behaviors are less likely to commit such behaviors in the first place. If individuals view the risk to receive punishments of their behavior, they may stop considering offending behavior. As a result, the government may try to decrease crime rates by increasing the cost of each criminal behavior. Specifically, the severity of the punishment, the likelihood of being punished, and the timeliness of receiving the punishment.

Lawmakers underscore the severity of punishment as the key component in the cost of criminal behaviors. Severity of punishment was long thought to be the key component in deterring criminal

behavior. Therefore, lawmakers attach heavy penalties to certain criminal behavior, praying that crime rates will decrease. However, reach examining the effect of such penalty on crime rates has surprisingly shown positive correlation between the two. While an escalation in the severity of punishment has been shown to reduce homicide rates, an unintended consequence has emerged: the rise in other forms of criminal activity as the severity of punishment intensifies. According to researchers, this outcome can be attributed to an increase in perpetrators' confidence that they won't be apprehended after engaging in such extreme behaviors. In some cases, perpetrators might not thoroughly assess the costs of their actions through rational analysis; instead, they act impulsively. It's possible that certain perpetrators hold misconceptions regarding the potential repercussions they may face, causing them to underestimate the true cost associated with committing these crimes. Other perpetrators may even view severity of punishment differently, lower than what lawmakers expect them to perceive.

Certainty of punishment is what most crimes consider in the first place. Individuals consider the possibility of being caught and punished for criminal behavior they commit. If certain behaviors have high benefits and low possibility of being caught, this offending behavior will be committed by more people. Sometimes by luck, people don't get caught for severe offending behavior and believe the punishment is unlikely. Therefore, they try to commit the same behavior again. Lawmakers have tried to increase the certainty of punishment, but raising the certainty only has small effect on the crime rate while high on social costs.

Celerity, the timeliness of punishment to offending behavior, is least considered by the society. Some studies suggest that celerity of punishment has no effect on reducing criminal behaviors. Other studies show that perpetrators prefer getting their punishment as quick as possible. As evidenced by instances of brutal executions in ancient times, it becomes apparent that the severity of a punishment is often linked to its duration. Comparatively, beheading, although undeniably cruel, is considered less brutal than death by burning alive. As suggested by the above factors, perpetrator only commit offending behaviors if the it is worth the risk of punishment [10].

3. Conclusion

Four approaches are used to explain the factors that contribute and people consider in criminal decision making. The economic approach, rational choice theory, believes in the balance of cost and benefit of actions. Individuals are more likely to commit crime that has higher benefit than cost. Although the standardized comparison of benefit and cost enable individuals to make decision, factors can affect people's perception. Studies show individuals that perceive more benefit from the action are more inclined to commit it. People lacking self-control perceive more benefit and less cost. This approach draw attention to the importance of self-control and adoption of long-term gratification in individuals. Not only helping to decrease crime, focusing on self-control and long-term gratification help individuals become more mature and successful. Social learning theory proposes something different. Influences from delinquent peers, media exposure of past crimes, and abnormal growth environment contribute to criminal behavior. People are more inclined to commit crimes if others had done it. Influences from abusive families or absence of families also create imitation of violent behavior and emotional release through offending behavior. Hence, if we need to solve the problem of crime, we need to start from preventing broken families and people's interaction with toxic contents and violent peers. Individual differences in personality and emotion also play a role in decision making. Intense emotions push people towards committing threatening behavior. Certain differences in personality imply different ways of thinking. Different levels of emotional sensitivity, fearfulness, and risk-taking, are all factors in considering the cost of criminal behaviors. Therefore, identifying threatening factors in personality models is important to prevent criminal behavior in the future. Punishment is the key component in considering the cost of criminal behavior. While previously government emphasize the severity of punishment, individuals seem to consider the certainty of crimes first. As a result, these finding encourage lawmakers in considering amendment for present

laws. Hopefully, these theories and models can contribute a deeper understanding about criminal decision making and preventing crime.

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