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Understanding crime: a multilevel approach

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ABSTRACT

According to contemporary scientific research human behaviour arises from a dynamic interplay between biological, psychological, cultural, and social processes. Therefore, because of their tendency to focus on only one of these levels of explanations, traditional criminology and forensic psychology can only offer partial understandings of crime. We contend that the best way forward for researchers and practitioners is to bring together different disciplinary perspectives and to develop integrative pluralistic explanations of crime.

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Introduction

In light of contemporary scientific findings, it is reasonable to accept that human behaviour arises from the dynamic interplay between biological, psychological, cultural, and social processes. A logical implication of this view is that traditional criminology and forensic psychology can only offer partial understandings of serious normative violations like crime (Durrant & Ward, 2015). Social variables such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality may set the scene for antisocial behaviour that leads to crime but on their own cannot explain it. In part this is because individual differences in capacities such as emotional regulation and cognition underpin criminal dispositions and need to be explicitly considered as well (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). However, appealing to psychological level explanations is also unlikely to fully account for crime and its associated problems. The major reason why social and psychological level explanations are insufficient to account for offending behaviour is the acknowledgement that as embodied and evolved organisms, individuals' actions can only be explained by the consideration of biological as well as social and psychological causes (Durrant & Ward, 2015). Molecular and neural systems levels are as important as the social and psychological; in fact, collectively they comprise an explanatory mosaic, contributing distinct and necessary parts of any satisfactory account of human behaviour (Craver, 2007).

The various disciplines comprising criminology offer unique perspectives on human functioning which ideally can be combined into *multilevel* (i.e. focus on the various components of a mechanism and their constituent processes), and *inter field* (i.e. include the unique viewpoints of different disciplines and sub disciplines) explanations of

psychological and social phenomena such as crime. While there is a temptation for researchers from different disciplines to claim causal priority, in our view, this is likely to impede the development of comprehensive explanations of crime and its related problems. A more promising strategy is that of integrative pluralism (e.g. Mitchell, 2003); creating a coalition of different explanatory accounts and linking them together in a coherent way.

In our experience there has been little attempt in the area of forensic psychology and criminology to formulate and implement truly integrative research strategies that might yield integrative multilevel explanations of crime. Our aim is to clear a pathway for the development of practices that might facilitate such explanations. We contend that the best way forward is to bring together scientists and philosophers representing different disciplinary perspectives on crime and its empirical investigation with an eye towards identifying points of convergence as well as potential obstacles to developing integrative explanations of crime. We are unable to think of a recent special issue of a journal in criminology, legal, forensic or correctional psychology that has undertaken such a project. Typically, one or two explanatory levels are privileged and the others underplayed or even ignored. We view this as a barrier to progress in understanding and explaining crime; given the complexity of the phenomena, multiple different scientific and philosophical perspectives must be brought to bear. It is our intention in the special issue to approach the understanding of crime from the viewpoint of explanatory pluralism. multi-level understanding of crime and its associated phenomena than has been previously provided in the literature. The value of such an approach is well expressed by Carl Craver (2007):

Finally, whereas reduction models emphasize the importance of explanatory reduction to fundamental levels, the mosaic view can be pluralistic about levels, recognizing the genuine importance of higher-level causes and explanations. The mosaic unity of science is constructed during the process of collaboration by different fields in the search for multilevel mechanisms. (p. 271).

There are two parts to the special issue. The first focuses on theory development, classification, values, methodology, and explanation and provides a theoretical framework from within which substantive theories of crime and its related problems can be constructed. Haig explores the role of scientific method in psychology and outlines the Abductive Theory of Method, which he argues has the theoretical resources to structure every phase of the inquiry process. In the first part of her paper Sullivan (2019) summarises the different types of explanation and then critically examines two recent proposals for developing better explanations of crime and its related problems. Day, Tamatea, and Geia (2019) discuss the ways that personal and professional values shape the ways in which criminal justice professionals practice. In their paper Ward and Carter (2019) argue that 'crime' is a problematic explanatory target and offer an alternative approach for classifying crime-related phenomena that focuses on the functional tasks individuals are engaged in rather than the type of crime they commit.

The second part of the special issue contains papers on different theoretical perspectives. Durrant (2019) outlines the role of evolutionary approaches for understanding crime, with a particular focus on gender differences. Developmental theories and models are given a thorough review from McGee and Farrington (2019), while Ling, Umbach, and Raine (2019), summarise recent research on neurobiological explanations

for crime. Psychological level explanations are given a critical review in Fortune and Heffernan's (2019) analysis of the psychology of criminal conduct, while Weaver (2019) explores the importance of social processes in desistance from crime. Social and cultural approaches are covered by Dixon, Harkins, and Wegerhoff (2019), who argue for the importance of integrating individual, social, and cultural perspective in understanding violence. Finally, Baron (2019) overviews the folk psychological or intentional level of explanation of human behaviour and traces its relationship to questions of accountability and responsibility in the criminal justice system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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