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Robert Eme



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Sex Differences in Temperament: A Partial Explanation for the Sex Difference in the Prevalence of Serious Antisocial Behaviors

Robert Eme

Abstract

Although temperamental traits, which refer to biologically based early-developing behavioral and emotional tendencies, have long been understood to be important constructs for understanding normal and abnormal development, their relevance to criminal justice has only recently been recognized. This paper extended belated recognition to an examination of how sex difference in three temperamental dimensions contributed to the massive sex difference in the severest forms of antisocial behavior. The dimensions were attention/regulation, activity level, and emotionality. A plausible biological mechanism influencing each of these sex differences was also discussed.

Introduction

Sex differences¹ are often associated with large phenotypic variation within species (Parsch & Ellegren, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that sex is widely acknowledged as an important factor in understanding individual differences in many behaviors (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). For example, the sex difference in the prevalence of three of the most severe antisocial behaviors of chronic physical aggression, violence, and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior is so large that these behaviors can be characterized as being almost exclusively male (Eme, 2014). Tremblay (2010) has aptly observed that of all the risk factors for the development of antisocial behavior, sex of the child is by far the most robust predictor. Similarly, with regard to crime, DeLisi (2016) has proclaimed sex as the “fundamental correlate of crime” (p. 20). Thus, given the magnitude of these sex differences, it is “necessary” to understand their causes to fully understand the causes of antisocial behaviors themselves (Lahey & Waldman, 2017, p. 452).

Among the numerous factors that are commonly cited for criminal offending (see Baskin-Sommers 2016, for a concise review), DeLisi and Vaughn (2014) have made a persuasive case for considering temperamental factors. Although temperamental factors have been considered important to understanding externalizing behaviors (Krieger & Stingaris, 2016), and although, there have been thousands of published works in multiple disciplines on various temperamental constructs, these constructs, which are “essential to criminal justice, are relatively new to it (p. 19).” This paper will extend the work of DeLisi and Vaughn (2014) on temperament to an examination of how sex differences in temperament contribute to the massive sex difference in

¹ There is a long history of debate about the use of “sex” vs. “gender” to characterize differences between males and females (Frieze & Chrisler, 2011). These terms are frequently used interchangeably, and the term “sex differences” can simply refer to observed differences between male and females regardless of their causes (Eagly & Wood, 2013). However, since “sex” typically implies biological causes, whereas “gender” typically implies experiential or cultural causes (Frieze & Chrisler, 2011), and since the focus of the article is on temperament which is heavily influenced by biology (Krieger & Stringaris, 2016; Rothbart, 2012), “sex difference” is the more apt term.

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