On the general relationship between victimization and offending: Examining cultural contingencies

Chad Posick *, Laurie A. Gould

Georgia Southern University, PO BOX 8105, 1332 Southern Drive, Statesboro, GA 30458

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Culture has been implicated in a wide range of individual behaviors. However, empirical investigation of how culture impacts violent behavior is limited. In particular, the well-established finding that there is an overlap between offenders and victims has not been examined in a culturally comparative context - limiting the ability to generalize current findings across cultures.

Purpose: This study uses data from the second International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD-II), a large school-based sample of adolescents in grades 7-9, and three measures from the Hofstede Dimensions of National Culture dataset to investigate how culture might moderate the relationship between victimization and offending.

Methods: A series of multivariate, multilevel models are run examining variation in the victim-offender overlap across contexts and attempting to explain why variations exist.

Results: The results indicate that victimization remains a salient predictor of offending across contexts with overall consistency in its effect on offending. Some cultural indicators were shown to slightly moderate this relationship.

Conclusions: While consistency in the victim-offender overlap was clear, individualism was a cultural-level variable that displayed a weak but statistically significant moderation effect on the victim-offender relationship suggesting that culture should not be altogether ignored in studies on violence.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

A flourishing literature in criminology reveals that offending and victimization are intrinsically linked across a wide variety of crimes and places (Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012; Lauritsen & Laub, 2007; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Posick, 2013). Research shows that victims and offenders share similar characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race) and their experiences can be predicted using similar theoretical frameworks (Schreck, Stewart, & Osgood, 2008). Further, this relationship (or overlap) has been found among several forms of violence as well as for various ethnic groups (Jennings, Park, Tomsich, Gover, & Akers, 2011; Maldonado-Molina, Jennings, Tobler, Piquero, & Canino, 2010; Posick, 2013). The quantitative evidence in support of this relationship is plentiful and continues to expand with contemporary studies.

While research supports the generality of the victim-offender overlap, a small number of recent efforts test this generalization across different social contexts producing conflicting results. Studies by Berg

and colleagues (Berg & Loeber, 2011; Berg, Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2012) and Schuck and Widom (2005) reveal that the victim-offender overlap is pronounced in disadvantaged neighborhoods where retaliation is prominent while Wright and Fagan (2013) find that the relationship between victimization and offending is attenuated in disadvantaged communities where there are a multitude of risk factors that dilute the relationship between offending and victimization (see also Zhang, Welte, & Wieczorek, 2001). In essence, it appears that context matters but *how* it matters is still up for debate.

Therefore, the current picture that empirical research displays is somewhat muddled and while there remain significant similarities among offenders and victims in terms of their characteristics and experiences, there are aspects of this relationship that may be contingent on social context. What is needed is a comparative study of the overlap using samples from several different social contexts. This study expands on existing work by exploring the generalities and contextual contingencies of the overlap using self-report data from a total of 24 countries. We specifically examine whether three cultural (or macro-level) variables: 1) masculinity, 2) power distance, and 3) individualism have direct influences on offending and whether these variables condition the relationship between victimization and offending. Each of these variables have merit as important factors in victim-offender overlap as both quantitative and qualitative research continue to reveal themes related to these cultural values.

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: cposick@georgiasouthern.edu (C. Posick), lgould@georgiasouthern.edu (L.A. Gould).

Culture defined

At its most basic level, culture can be broadly defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1998, p. 6). "Collective programming" typically represents the value system of a society marked by customs and traditions adhered to by a majority of citizens. House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) provide a more specific definition of culture and operationalize it as countries sharing a common language, ideological belief system (religious and political), ethnic heritage, and history. Culture is found to account for at least 25% - 50% of a person's basic value system (Hofstede, 2001). Those values impact our thoughts, decisions, and behaviors because "when individuals act according to their culture, they are following inclinations developed from their exposure to the particular traditions, practices, and beliefs among those who live and interact in the same physical and social environment" (Wilson, 2009, p. 4). Culture is critical to understanding individual behaviors, because it has the capacity to limit the range of available opportunities and, by extension, limit the life choices an individual can freely make (Shutz, 2011). Given the considerable variation between cultures across the globe, available opportunities can differ vastly from group to group (Shutz, 2011). The idea that available opportunities influence criminality has received much empirical support in the literature (see for example, Felson & Clarke, 1998); however, given that available opportunities are strongly conditioned by culture, a full understanding of offending and victimization patterns must include an examination of the role of culture.

While the definition of culture provided by House et al. (2004) represents a relatively straightforward way to operationalize culture, it is by no means comprehensive. The concept of culture is "fuzzy" at best (Hofstede, 1998) and there are myriad variables that could be examined, depending on the nature and scope of the research. For the current study, we rely on measures from the Hofstede Dimensions of National Culture dataset, one of the most widely used measures of culture. The Hofstede model was originally developed to assess organizational culture, however we contend that its utility extends well beyond that domain and can offer important insights into individual cultural values and behaviors.

Within the broader criminological and sociological literature there has been debate about possible linkages between macro and micro level cultural processes. Undoubtedly, this debate extends, at least in part, to the complex, multi-level nature of culture. Erez and Gati (2004) note, culture is a dynamic process wherein cultural shifts or changes in behavior at the macro level lead to changes at lower levels and vice versa. As they explain,

"Through top-down processes of socialization individuals internalize the shared meaning system of the society to which they belong, and its values are represented in the individual self. Then, through bottom-up processes of aggregation and shared values, higher-level entities of culture are formed, at the group, organizational, and national levels" (Erez & Gati, 2004, p. 587).

Support for this dynamic process has been found in examinations of the relationship between "street culture" and the victim/offender overlap (see for example Anderson, 1999; Berg et al., 2012; Singer, 1986; Wolfgang, 1958). There is broad consensus within the literature that "street culture" in a major contributing factor in the victim/offender overlap. We recognize that neighborhood culture does not rise to the same level as national culture, however these studies demonstrate the dynamic relationship between different levels of culture. Given this, we assert that linkages can indeed be made between a nation's culture and the individual behaviors of its citizens. Additionally, because the Hofstede model includes measures of values *and* behavior, it can offer important insights into the relationship between culture and the victim/offender overlap.

The Hofstede model includes critical dimensions of culture including, power distance (e.g., acceptance of power disparities), societal individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity (e.g., competition vs. consensus), rigidity of belief systems, adaptability to changing social conditions, and societal regulation/restraint of citizens' gratification. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, and the recurring themes revealed in empirical studies, we have chosen to focus on three dimensions, masculinity, power distance, and individualism. These three dimensions have been found to correlate with other aspects of social life. Notably, power distance is associated with economic inequality and the willingness of the state to employ violence in domestic politics; national wealth and social mobility are strongly related to a nations position on the collectivist/individualist continuum; and lastly, countries characterized as having a more masculine orientation tend to limit women's political participation (Hofstede, n.d.).

Masculinity

Hofstede's dimension of national culture, masculinity vs. femininity, provides a measure of the degree of competition in society. More masculine societies (also referred to as "cultures of honor") place greater emphasis on achievement, assertiveness, and material success, thereby producing a more competitive society (Hofstede, 2001). At the other end of the spectrum, more feminine cultures tend to display preferences for quality of life issues and consensus building (Hofstede, 2001). Further, societies with a more masculine orientation have widely accepted gender norms, whereby men are expected to be assertive and women are expected to be modest and express more concern for quality of life issues (Hofstede, 2001).

At the country level, highly masculine societies are more ego-oriented, have a greater gender gap in compensation, are more willing to use violence to settle conflict, and tend to embrace more "traditional" family structures (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, low masculine societies emphasize relationships, favor negotiation over force for conflict resolution, have a lower compensation gap between genders, and tend to be more accepting of more diverse family types (Hofstede, 2001). It is important to note that the masculinity/femininity dichotomy has little to do with perceived biological differences between men and women, but is instead a social construction. As Peterson and Runyan (2009, p. 5) explain, "gender is a social, not physiological, construction; it is not the same as, and may be wholly unrelated to, sex; it is not a synonym for women, but rather a hierarchical relationship between constructions of masculinity and femininity; hence, men and masculinity are as important as women and femininity are for analyzing gender."

Violence is thought to be more prevalent in countries that promote more masculine ideals (Hattery & Smith, 2012). As Travaglino, Abrams, de Moura, and Russo (2014) explain, violence in this cultural context emanates, in part, from the expectation that men have an obligation to protect their reputation, as well as the honor of "their women." For juveniles in particular, being raised in a hyper-masculine culture increases the likelihood of gang involvement, thereby increasing the risk of both victimization and offending. Cross-national examinations of juvenile gang involvement have revealed distinct cultural differences in this area. Zdun (2008, p. 41-42) explains,

"In the disadvantaged areas of big cities in Brazil and Russia, for instance, juveniles often need not only close friends with whom they share a strong sense of solidarity, but also strong friends who are able to protect each other against rivals. So even young men who largely reject violence can become associated with aggressive youths in their neighborhood for protection."

This phenomenon was not observed in Germany, a country not characterized by a culture of masculinity. Broadly speaking, Zdun (2008) noted that involvement in violent conflict among German youth was