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Violent criminality and self-compassion

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and discusses multiple sociological, psychological, and neurological risk factors associated with violent crime and proposes self-compassion, an indicator of positive mental health, as a common link among these variables. Cross-disciplinary findings have implicated neurological abnormalities resulting from exposure to violence, low self-control, lack of social bonds, and self-esteem to violent criminality. This paper contends that self-compassion is associated with each of these variables and discusses current findings that provide evidence for a link between self-compassion and violent crime. Furthermore, this paper discusses an example of an intervention that involves self-compassion. Finally, this paper discusses implications of the link between self-compassion to violent crime and risk factors associated with violent crime.

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1. Introduction

Crime is a concern for the general public, with violent crime being the most feared (Rader, May, & Goodrum, 2007). The United States surpasses the world in the number of people it incarcerates (Kurian, 1997; Liptak, 2008; Walmsley, 2012), with over 2,266,800 people imprisoned as of 2010 (Glaze & Parks, 2011). Though perpetrators of violent crimes are arrested, convicted, and sent to prison, they usually return to society after they have served their sentence in prison. To understand this problem, researchers have unearthed numerous sociological, neurological, and psychological risk factors associated with criminality. Many researchers theorize that exposure to violence leads to changes in the neurological structures that increase the risk for developing antisocial disorder and engaging in criminal activity (De Bellis, 2005; Robins,

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1966; Weiler & Wisdom, 1996; Yang & Raine, 2009). Further, researchers have theorized that violent criminals lack of self-control (Gotfredson & Hirschi, 1990), lack of social connectedness (Sampson & Laub, 1993), and have low self-esteem (Toch, 1969; Oser, 2006).

Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) is a diagnosis often synonymous with aggression and violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Researchers have recognized that long-term exposure to violence may lead to neurological changes producing symptoms characteristic of APD (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). These changes include both structural and functional abnormalities in the amygdala, insula cortex, striatum, and a variety of regions in the prefrontal cortex (Hart & Rubia, 2012; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2010; Yang & Raine, 2009). Criminologists have identified a concept with significant overlap to APD called low self-control (Gotfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Gotfredson and Hirschi (1990) theorized that criminality is characterized by a lack of self-control. Since Gottfredson and Hirschi, researchers have confirmed that self-control has a negative correlation with: aggression (Netter, Hennig, Rohrmann, Wyhlidal, & Hain-Hermann, 1998), impaired ability to defer gratification (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993), and with violent reoffending among violent criminals (Grieger, Hosser, & Schmidt, 2012).

As for the second indicator of criminality that this review investigates, criminality is characterized as a form of antisocial behavior (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993), that is, criminal behavior may deter the ability to connect socially with others. Sampson and Laub (1993) found support for a negative relationship between the ability to form social bonds and criminality. Other researchers since Sampson and Laub have found similar results (Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). In addition to self-control and social connectedness, research suggests that self-esteem has a negative relationship with violent criminality (Anderson, 1994; Long, 1990; Oser, 2006; Toch, 1969). Research supporting this relationship indicates that self-esteem has a negative relationship with aggression (Murphy, Stosny, & Morrel, 2005) and the number of violent offense committed by violent criminals. In addition, researchers have revealed that the construct of narcissism moderates the relationship between self-esteem and violent criminality (Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998; Sullivan & Geaslin, 2001). More specifically, narcissists tend to aggress against others when their self-esteem is threatened (Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998).

While research on criminality traditionally focuses on risk factors associated with crime, there are a growing number of researchers investigating how positive psychological states improve risk outcomes (Woldgabreal, Day, & Ward, 2014). One variable that shows potential, self-compassion has been conceptualized as a positive indicator of mental health (Neff, 2003b). Despite the lack of research investigating its relationship to violent criminality, self-compassion shows promise as a negative indicator of violent criminality. Research indicates that self-compassion has a negative relationship with anger (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and a positive one with self-esteem and social connectedness (Murphy et al., 2005; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007; Stosny, 1995). In addition, mindfulness, a component of self-compassion, has been shown to be a negative indicator of criminality (Rainforth, Alexander, & Cavanaugh, 2003). Furthermore, mindfulness appears related to self-control. (Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007). In addition, self-compassion may be associated with regions of the brain impaired by APD (Hölzel et al., 2011; Klimecki, Leiberg, Lamm, & Singer, 2013; Longe et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2011).

In this article, the sociological, criminological, psychological, and neurological literature is reviewed in order to evaluate self-compassion as a potential unifying link to many correlates of violent crime. Moreover, the following two sections of this report cover relevant definitions in criminology, provides an overview of research on violent criminals, demographics of perpetrators, investigate the role that poverty, and exposure to violence in eliciting violent crime. In section four, this review presents the link of neurological abnormalities associated antisocial personality disorder, aggression, and exposure to violence. Section five covers the psychological predictors of criminality including self-control, social connectedness, and self-esteem. Finally, section six introduces self-compassion and discusses its connection to violent criminality.

2. Definitions relating to crime and criminality

Traditional definitions of crime define it as any behavior that is prohibited by a sovereign power (Gotfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Metfessel & Lovell, 1942; Michael & Adler, 1993). Traditional definitions are problematic in that sovereign powers vary in the behaviors that they prohibit and often change prohibitions. Further, sovereign powers have the propensity to commit acts described as criminal by other sovereign powers, such as war crimes or genocide (Baum, 2008). Citing the problematic nature of previous definitions of crime, Gotfredson and Hirschi (1990) defined crime as an "act of force or fraud undertaken in pursuits of self-interest" (p.15). Further, they described criminality as the "propensity to commit force or fraud" (p.4). Gottfredson and Hirschi's definition of crime differs from previous definitions in that it includes crimes that are malum in se or crimes against human beings or animals. In other words, Gottfredson and Hirschi's definition of crime involves aggressing against, stealing from, or deceiving others to part with their life, health, or property for the pursuit of individual gains. Although, Gottfredson and Hirschi's definition appears promising theoretically, practically the definition of crime is limited by a sovereign power's interpretation of crime. Specifically, research on criminality involves individuals labeled criminals by a sovereign power; in the case of my research interest, the sovereign power is the United States and the State of Texas. In order to satisfy the traditional definition and to consider Gottfredson and Hirschi's theoretical views of crime, this review is focused on crimes that the United States considers the most serious acts of force against others in pursuit of self-interest, violent crimes. Violent crimes include robbery, murder, non-negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, and forced rape (Reaves, 2006).

Another important issue to define what makes an individual a criminal is frequency. Some individuals commit multiple crimes. When such an individual recommits a crime after being released from custody of a criminal enforcement agency, such an individual is termed a *recidivist*. *Recidivism* is the tendency to relapse back into an undesirable behavior, specifically crime. An individual who continues to commit crimes over a life course is defined as a *persister*, whereas a *desister* is one who discontinues criminal behavior at some point during the life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Research indicates that previous criminal behavior is a positive predictor of future criminal behavior (Mossman, 1994; Shah, 1978; Wolfgang, 1978). Further, Mossman (1994) demonstrated that criminal history was a stronger predictor of future criminal behavior than clinical judgments. In addition, research suggests that the probability for re-arrest increases with each successive conviction (Shah, 1978; Wolfgang, 1978). Despite this evidence, many researchers have argued that criminal trajectories are not set and that criminal behavior may be discontinued at some point in a criminals' life course (Hollin, 1999; Losel, 1995; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Polaschek & Collie, 2004; Sampson & Laub, 2003).

When an individual recidivates, an important question is whether he/she is more likely to commit the same crime or a new one. This leads to the question of whether criminals specialize. Researchers have found that criminals generally do not specialize in the type of crime they commit (Gotfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Simon, 1998). Yet, violent crimes are predictive of recidivism, especially recidivism involving more violence (Caspi et al., 1994; Hall, 1982; Mandelzys, 1979). Violent criminals are likely also to engage in other antisocial or self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol abuse, smoking, sexual promiscuity, driving recklessly, or driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol (Grasmick et al., 1993).