Aggression and Violent Behavior 25 (2015) 95–103

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

The assumption of rational choice theory in Alfred Adler's theory of crime: Unraveling and reconciling the contradiction in Adlerian theory through synthesis and critique

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 January 2015
Accepted 8 July 2015
Available online 26 July 2015

Keywords:
Alfred Adler
Psychological theory of crime
Rational choice
Classical School

ABSTRACT

Alfred Adler is often introduced and discussed incorrectly as one of Freud's students and as a psychoanalytic theorist in criminology and psychology textbooks. While thinkers such as Freud and Jung theorize about crime in tangential ways, as almost an afterthought to their accounts of neurosis and personality, Alfred Adler was one of the few pioneers in the history of psychology who had an actual theory of crime. Yet, Adler's writings on crime, its causes and assumptions have been largely overlooked in contemporary research. While Adler espoused the view that crime represents a "useless" response to the social demands of life, we argue that Adler's theory of crime presupposes a rational choice model of criminal behavior, thus mirroring the Classical School perspective on crime. This paper provides a synthesis and a critique of Alfred Adler's theory of crime.

1. Introduction

Theories of crime implicitly presuppose a theory of self—a theory that provides a metaphysical account of motivation. For instance, choice theories of crime assume the rational, deliberative capacity of subjects to choose crime based on the principle of utility (Arrigo & Young, 1998). Differential theory of crime implicitly assumes a subject's (un)conscious need for approval from sources of moral authority as an underpinning of subjectivity (Bracher, 1993; Burgess & Akers, 1966); causal theories of crime assume the presence of an almost universalizable, decontextualized force (e.g., self-control) that drives behavior (see Akers & Sellers, 2013). Even life-course theory assumes a positive, forward movement of a self toward social integration—unless hampered by snares—in its theory of self (see Moffitt, 1993a; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Crime can be viewed as an unnatural process that emerges when this life affirming momentum of the will is disrupted, and major turning points in life such as a strong marriage, steady employment, and military service facilitate meaningful behavioral change that work to reintegrate persons toward sociality (Farrington & West, 1995; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2003). A theory of self embedded in theories of crime either affirms consciousness and agency of subjects in some metaphysical way or vitiates their agency, rendering them as passive dopes who are controlled by extraneous forces (Milovanovic, 1997). Either way, theories of crime entail a theory of self.

Since a theory of self precedes a theory of crime, it may serve criminologists well to look to their disciplinary neighbors to learn how consciousness, motivation, and agency have been formulated in psychology. Although psychological theories of crime have not been as dominant as the sociologically-informed theories of crime (e.g., differential association, rational choice, social disorganization, life-course) in the discipline of criminology (Laub & Sampson, 1991), they have the potential to benefit criminology in the following ways: (1) psychological theories of crime already begin with a theory of self and an account of motivation in place. For instance, Freud (1938) theorized that people are motivated by the pleasure principle to satiate their physiological drives. Adler (1927a, 1927b) argued that individuals are motivated by a will-to-power which guides their prideful striving for superiority. Such accounts of theories of a self fill a glaring omission in contemporary criminological theory—a theory of self and a concomitant theory of motivation. People commit "crimes" for many reasons, and those reasons illuminate the variegated forms of motivation that are often tacitly presupposed in theories of crime. (2) A theory of self and its relation to society can be mined as the beginning point of a philosophically informed theory of crime and the state, for the assumptions about why people break rules lead to policies that attempt to contain and control problematic behaviors (e.g., Akers & Sellers, 2013). Consequently, criminologists have begun to argue for the need for a theory of self behind crime, criminological and criminal justice theory, as well as the self's relationship to the state as a way of buttressing

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.07.004
1359-1789/

the discipline's identity and legitimacy (Arrigo, 2008; Ferrell, 2009; Kraska, 2006).

This paper examines the works of one of the notable psychological theorists of personality and crime: Alfred Adler. There are several reasons why Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology and his theory of crime should be examined relative to contemporary criminological theories. First, most criminological texts fail to address psychological theories of crime and their contributions to the understanding of criminal behavior beyond the works of Freud, Jung, Fromm, or Erikson—to the virtual exclusion of Alfred Adler. Or, Alfred Adler's ideas are erroneously misrepresented as psychoanalysis, and he as one of Freud's students (Barton-Bellessa et al., 2015). It behooves us to explore and understand Adler's contribution to psychology and criminology in its own right.

Second, despite the voluminous works on personality formation, neurosis, crime, and psychotherapy, Alfred Adler's ideas are less well known when compared to his contemporaries such as Freud (1938) and Jung (1957, 1971). Importantly, Individual Psychology is imbued with its own set of metaphysical assumptions about the self (Stone, 2008) in ways that differ from psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Jung (Barton-Bellessa et al., 2015). Adler is also relevant for criminology as he was one of the few psychologists who had an actual theory of crime. Adler did not treat crime and criminals as tertiary topics as Freud and Jung did. For Adler, criminals, neurotics, perverts, and psychotics were all explained using one cogent construct (see Adler, 2002a, 2003a). Thus, rather than perpetuating inaccurate information about the works of Alfred Adler, it behooves us to fix the erroneous state of criminology and psychological theories of crime by imparting the actual views Adler espoused.

Finally, while Adler espoused a view similar to life-course theory of crime nearly a hundred years ago, he did not call his theory of crime by that name. In fact, although Adler's theory of crime tacitly suggested a life-course model, he overemphasized certain assumptions about offending on an individual level while neglecting to examine certain sociological aspects about crime. To date, however, few works have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of Adler's theory of crime, as well as the points of convergence and divergence in relation to contemporary criminological theories, although a few have directly tested his theory of crime (e.g., Highland, Kern, & Curlette, 2010; Newbauer & Stone, 2010; Sweitzer, 2005). This paper attempts to fill in those shortcomings in Adler's work by situating his theory relative to contemporary sociological and criminological theories of crime. First, this paper begins by providing an overview of Adler's theory of personality and crime. Second, it situates Adlerian theory of crime in the context of contemporary criminological theories. Finally, this paper provides a critique of Adler's theory of crime from a process- and power-oriented framework of contemporary criminological perspectives. The implications for Adler's theory of crime are discussed.

2. Alfred Adler's theory of personality and crime

From the Individual Psychological perspective of Alfred Adler, neurotics, alcoholics, drug addicts, and "criminals" share a common bond: lack of social interest. That is, rather than conceptualizing mental health by the absence of intrapsychic conflict a la Freud, Adler (1927a, 1927b, 1931, 2007, 1917) was a proponent of examining the self's relationship to society in holistic ways, as indicated by the subjects' response to the demands of the three main tasks of life: friendship, work, and love. According to the tenets of Individual Psychology, a person has two principal ways of responding to the question of how he or she will contribute to society and fellow citizens: in socially useful or socially useless ways (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). Mental health, in Adlerian theory, is measured in terms of social utility.

Since Adler's pioneering foray into the causes of deviant behavior (see The Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler, vols. 1–12), his followers have extended his ideas to a variety of problematic behaviors, such as purging (Marshall & Fitch, 2006), perfectionism (Stoltz & Ashby, 2007), binge drinking (Lewis., & Wachter, 2006), safeguarding through hesitation (Stewart, 2007), and narcissism (Boldt, 2007; Maniacci, 2007). Preceding Adler-informed works have in common the finding that individuals who engage in aberrant behaviors attempt to use their symptoms as a way of gaining a false sense of superiority over others: rather than contributing to society in socially useful and productive ways, they have chosen to evade the main tasks of life by adopting neurotic and criminal methods of reinforcing their false senses of pride.

According to the tenets of Individual Psychology, personality begins in infancy and is largely formed by the age of 5: an infant's realization of its dependence on others to meet its basic needs leads to feelings of inferiority. Although Adler discussed several other factors that led to feelings of inferiority, he was emphatic about the influence of parenting style and birth order on the development of personality (see Eckstein et al., 2010). Adler's works on the psychology of birth order and its effect on the antithetical schemes of apperception and personality defects (see Adler, 2005a) can be succinctly synthesized into two principal constructs that exemplify the consequences of a subjectively perceived and created interpretation of reality: pampering and neglect.

In a nutshell, pampered children have been trained to be dependent on others while neglected (i.e., hated, abused, maltreated) children have been raised to be "on guard" in life. Whether pampered and neglected children expect to be pampered or demand it, whether they seek the continuation of pampering or demand to be compensated for its absence as adults, the consequences of pampering and neglect lead to a particular psychology of criminality (see Adler, 2004a). First, the expectation of continuation and compensation lead to discontentment and perceptions of being "shortchanged," which leads to a sense of entitlement that life owes something to those who have been brought up pampered or neglected (Horney, 1950); if one feels entitled to something, the next step in the evolution of behavior is to forcibly take it (see Beech, Fisher, & Ward, 2005; Fisher, Beech, Carich, & Kohut, 2006; Polaschek & Gannon, 2004). Second, those who have been pampered and neglected have not sufficiently developed their levels of social interest; consequently, they are inconsiderate toward others and have difficulty establishing relationships with other people. As they have been brought up in self-centered ways, both pampered and neglected persons maintain styles of life that are egotistical and self-indulgent (Canter, 2000; Carich, Fisher, & Kohut, 2006; Horney, 1937). Third, because they have not figured out how to relate meaningfully to others, there is a compulsion to gain a sense of superiority over them by deception, guile, or force (Horney, 1945). Finally, both pampered and neglected individuals aim at escaping the responsibilities of life, society, work, and intimacy by avoiding cooperative solutions.

If neurotics and criminals share similarities in the sources of their feelings of inferiority, there are notable differences as well. Neurotics have a limited sphere of activity, and this limitation forces neurotics to control others through their symptoms. Criminals, on the other hand, possess a limited amount of cooperation and a greater degree of activity. Their striving toward superiority is not as restricted as that of neurotics. According to Adler's (2003b, 2006a) theory of crime, criminals' propensities toward crime are largely set by the age of 4 or 5. Children who are neglected, abused, and unwanted are likely to form a mean view of the world. They are likely to feel "shortchanged" and unloved, and to believe that they have been unfairly treated by those around them. Consequently, their propensity toward crime is first manifested in juvenile delinquency: those children will play truant from school and associate with others who provide a sense of belonging, acceptance, and protection; school administrators and teachers who punish them will only confirm the presupposed view that the world is an unjust place. Essentially, the preceding statements encapsulated Adler's theory of onset of crime, juvenile delinquency, and gang membership.

If neurotics expect to be pampered by enlisting others to serve their needs through their symptoms, criminals exercise agency and forcibly take what they think is owed to them. According to Adler, criminals