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Crime and Gender

One of the most consistent and strong findings in criminology is that females commit much less crime and juvenile delinquency than males. This gender gap in law-violation is found using data on arrests, convictions, self-reported crime, and victims' reports about offenders. It also appears to exist across nations and over time.

Yet, until the 1980s, gender differences in crime received scant attention. In the 1970s, feminist critiques of criminology called attention to the neglect of females (e.g., Smart 1976). Since that time, there has been a trend toward taking more seriously the issue of female offending and the gender gap in crime and delinquency.

This article summarizes the research on gender and crime that has been conducted since these critiques. It first identifies some of the major issues that have emerged in this research, and identifies three typical approaches to the study of gender and crime. It then discusses key findings and arguments in research taking each of these approaches. Note that space limitations restrict the scope of this essay to research on the causes of gender differences in offending; it does not address the literatures on gender and victimization, or gender and criminal justice processing. For a review of this literature, see Kruttschnitt (1996).

1. Approaches to Studying Gender, Crime, and Delinquency

A major issue in research on gender and offending centers on the level of analysis. One line of research focuses on the *macro-level* of analysis, emphasizing patterns of crime over time and space, and seeking to explain these as the outcomes of broad social patterns. Specifically, this line of research examines changes in the gender gap in crime over time, and reports some convergence between female and male crime rates since the 1950s and 1960s in various nations, including England and Wales, Canada, and the United States (Box and Hale 1983, Fox and Hartnagel 1979, Steffensmeier 1993). At some times during this period, the increase in female crime rates has exceeded the increase in male rates; at other times, male crime rates have declined more than have female rates. Both of these patterns have resulted in some narrowing of the gender gap in crime, although male offending exceeds female

offending throughout the period. This pattern holds for most types of serious crime, except murder (Heimer 2000); however, it is more pronounced during some periods for certain property crimes, such as larceny and fraud (Steffensmeier 1993). Almost all existing research on changes in the gender gap uses annual arrest or conviction rates, aggregated to the national level. The typical explanations offered for the changes include women's liberation and economic circumstances.

Another line of research on gender differences in offending uses individual-level data and proposes *social-psychological* explanations. This research typically is based on quantitative data from self-report surveys administered to large samples. These surveys show that males are more likely than females to commit minor, as well as serious, law violations. However, the gender gap is most pronounced for the most serious offenses (see Smith and Visser 1980). Individual-level research has focused on how social-psychological factors—such as family processes, beliefs, and attitudes—contribute to the gender gap in law-violation.

A second major issue in the study of gender and crime is the type of methodology employed. Whereas the two lines of research discussed above rely mostly on *quantitative* methods, a third line of research uses *qualitative* methods, such as the analysis of open-ended interviews and ethnographic techniques. This research most often focuses on either male or female offenders, and thus addresses differences in crime among groups of females or groups of males rather than the comparison of offending across gender.

The remainder of this essay briefly reviews the three lines of research identified above. It then, discusses attempts to bridge the macro- and individual-levels of analysis. Finally, it suggests that fruitful avenues for future research are continuing to bridge levels of analysis, and moving toward greater synthesis of quantitative and qualitative research findings.

2. Research on the Narrowing of the Gender Gap Over Time

Research on the narrowing of the gender gap in crime rates over time proposes three explanations—women's liberation, economic marginalization, and the decline in chivalry. The *liberation hypothesis* argues that women's crime rates increased during the 1960s and 1970s because women gained increased economic and social independence from men. One variant proposes that a convergence in gender roles led to a convergence in the gender gap in all types of crime (Adler and Adler 1975). Another variant proposes that women's increased labor-force participation created new opportunities for crime in the workplace (Simon 1975). Both variants have been criticized for assuming that labor-force participation and improved economic

conditions increase crime by females, whereas these conditions reduce crime by males (Chesney-Lind 1997). Moreover, the narrowing of the gender gap is most pronounced for crimes that are consistent with women's preliberation roles—including larceny (theft), fraud, and forgery (see Steffensmeier 1993). Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, empirical research provides little evidence that women's labor-force participation increases their crime (e.g., Box and Hale 1983; for review, see Steffensmeier and Allan 1996).

Consequently, contemporary studies often focus on the *economic marginalization hypothesis*, which proposes that the increased financial hardship of women relative to men has contributed to the narrowing gender gap in crime (Box 1987, Steffensmeier 1993). Very few studies have assessed this hypothesis empirically, and existing studies use restricted measures of economic marginalization. A review of these studies argues that future research needs to address the interplay between the specific elements of women's poverty that affect their crime rates, including increasing rates of single motherhood, persistent gender inequality in wages, and changes in social welfare policies (Heimer 2000).

A third explanation of the narrowing of the gender gap in crime is the *decline of chivalry hypothesis*, which proposes that the observed changes are due in part to changing attitudes among law enforcement personnel. Specifically, the gender gap in arrest rates reflects the chivalry of law enforcement personnel toward women (e.g., hesitation to arrest women), and the narrowing of the gap reflects a decline in this attitude over the years (Steffensmeier 1993). Empirical evidence suggests that the decline of chivalry likely has had some effect on changes in the gender gap in crime, although economic factors are at least as important (Box and Hale 1983, Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). However, there remains debate over the veracity of the chivalry hypothesis, with some researchers arguing that females are treated more harshly than males for some types of offenses (Chesney-Lind 1997).

3. Qualitative Research on Women's Offending

Consistent with the economic marginalization hypothesis, most ethnographic and qualitative studies of women's crime highlight structural disadvantages. These studies typically focus on women offenders only and do not address directly the gender gap in offending. Instead, they conduct an in-depth analysis of the factors that are associated with chronic offending among women. As a group, these studies suggest that poverty, unemployment, and single motherhood combine to create conditions of extreme economic hardship, which in turn are associated with events and conditions of women's lives that increase the chances of a life of crime (Miller 1986, Carlen 1988, Daly 1994, Maher 1997, Baskin and Sommers 1998). For instance,

several studies emphasize the connections between abuse during childhood, economic hardships, and criminal careers among women (Daly 1994, Maher 1997). Other studies show how living in a marginalized community facilitates entry into criminal networks and peer groups, which play an important role in initiating women into lives of crime and sustaining these lifestyles in the future (Miller 1986, Baskin and Sommers 1998). Finally, several studies suggest that turning to crime is a rational attempt to support children and other family members when confronted with severe economic hardship (e.g., Miller 1986, Carlen 1988). These studies offer rich insight into the social world of female chronic offenders and, as we note in Sect. 5, open the door for the development of theories that can address macro-level as well as social-psychological processes.

4. Self-Report Research on Gender and Juvenile Delinquency

Most research based on self-report surveys focuses on juvenile delinquency, especially common and less serious forms of delinquency. The emphasis is on understanding the social-psychological mechanisms that contribute to the gender gap in delinquency. Recent research on these mechanisms suggests that the gender gap reflects both gender differences in *exposure* to factors that make law violation more likely, as well as gender differences in the *impact* of these factors.

The social-psychological mechanisms that have received the most attention in research on gender and delinquency occur within the family. Specifically, some research shows that part of the gender gap in delinquency is explained by the greater exposure of girls than boys both to direct parental controls, such as supervision and monitoring, and to indirect controls, such as emotional bonding (e.g., Jensen and Eve 1979, Hagan et al. 1985, 1987). Other research shows that the gender gap is not the simple outcome of girls being subject to higher levels of familial controls, but also reflects the differential impact of these controls on girls versus boys. For instance, even though girls are more closely supervised, boys' delinquency appears to be influenced more strongly by supervision and monitoring; by contrast, girls' delinquency is influenced more strongly by emotional bonds to their families (Heimer and De Coster 1999; see also Hagan 1989). In short, it may be that parents control girls' misbehavior through subtle, covert control mechanisms (e.g., emotional bonding), whereas controlling boys' misbehavior requires more direct, overt strategies (e.g., supervision).

Another individual-level factor that has received attention is gender roles. The argument, related to the liberation thesis discussed above, is that feminine roles restrain delinquency more than masculine roles do (e.g., Shover and Norland 1979). Many studies of

gender roles and delinquency appeared in the late 1970s. However, the empirical research was inconsistent, perhaps because gender roles were operationalized in diverse ways across studies, often including traits, attitudes, and familial controls as well as behavioral expectations or roles.

The more recent trend has been to focus on cultural definitions of gender or hegemonic gender definitions, which are widely-accepted beliefs and attitudes that support the subordination of females to males under patriarchy. Hegemonic gender definitions depict a feminine ideal that includes a high capacity for nurturance, passivity, connectedness to others, and physical weakness; by contrast, the masculine ideal emphasizes competitiveness, aggressiveness, independence, and strength. Definitions of femininity thus are more inconsistent than definitions of masculinity with victimizing others physically or taking their property. Some empirical research shows that acceptance of these gender definitions is an important contributor to the gender gap in law violation (Simpson and Elis 1995, Heimer and De Coster 1999). Other research suggests that boys who have internalized hegemonic definitions of masculinity are more likely to engage in crime and violence (Messerschmidt 2000).

A third individual-level factor that has received attention in the literature on gender and delinquency is attitudes toward risk-taking. The hypothesis here is that youths who develop a taste for risk will be more likely than others to engage in thrill-seeking behavior, including delinquency. The power-control theory of gender and delinquency, discussed below, proposes that one reason males are more likely than females to be delinquent is that males are socialized to prefer risk-taking (Hagan 1989).

5. *Bridging Levels of Explanation*

To date, most research on gender and criminal offending has focused on either the macro-level or social-psychological explanations discussed above, and rarely has pursued links between the two. One notable exception is Hagan's power-control theory, which argues that parents' positions in the workplace shape their parenting practices, including their supervision of children, emotional bonding with children, and the inculcation of taste for risk in children (Hagan et al. 1985, 1987). More specifically, when fathers have more power than mothers in their work or professional lives, mothers experience paternalistic control within the family. They then reproduce this arrangement with their children by subjecting their daughters to higher levels of control and by encouraging taste for risk more among their sons. When parents have more equal power in their work lives, female and male children are treated more equally. Thus the gender gap in delinquency will be smaller in the latter type of family. Research supports many of these arguments, although there is some debate over some of the specific

predictions (e.g., Jensen and Thompson 1990, Morash and Chesney-Lind 1991).

Another emerging perspective on gender and crime with the potential to bridge levels of analysis is the work of Messerschmidt (e.g., 1993, 2000). He argues that males may attempt to display masculinity through crime and violence when legitimate channels for claiming their gender are blocked by structural barriers, such as unemployment and poverty (Messerschmidt 1993). Messerschmidt (2000) further explores links between structural barriers and social-psychological mechanisms in his analysis of boys' violence. He argues that much of this violence is a result of the interplay between patriarchal structures, social class, and social-psychological processes, such as alienation at school, victimization, body image, and hegemonic masculine ideals. Although this line of work does not address female offending, it moves toward bridging levels in analyzing masculinity and crime, and suggests a pathway for a similar analysis addressing femininity and crime.

Some of the qualitative research discussed in Sect. 3 also could serve as a springboard for the development of theories that bridge the macro- and social-psychological levels of analysis. Many of these studies examine how economic hardship and cultural contexts influence individuals' perceptions and decisions about crime (e.g., Miller 1986, Maher 1997, Baskin and Sommers 1998). The next step would be to account for these findings by specifying a theory of the links between the macro- and individual-level mechanisms leading to women's crime, and then broaden this explanation to address gender differences in crime.

6. *Directions for Future Research*

Up to the end of the twentieth century the strands of research discussed above have remained relatively isolated from one another. In addition, research has been aimed more at uncovering empirical relationships than at building comprehensive theories of gender, crime, and delinquency. Future research will need to develop rigorous theoretical arguments that link levels of analysis, drawing links between the mechanisms identified by macro-level research on changes in the gender gap and individual-level survey research. Moreover, research must bridge the divide between quantitative and qualitative research, combining findings from both to generate more complete explanations of gender, crime, and delinquency.

See also: Crime and Ethnicity (Including Race); Crime, Geography of; Crime: Sociological Aspects; Crime, Sociology of; Criminology: Psychopathological Aspects; Delinquency, Sociology of; Gender and the Law; Gender, Class, Race, and Ethnicity, Social Construction of; Gender Differences in Personality and Social Behavior; Gender-related Development; Personality and Crime

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Crime, Geography of

Crime is a form of deviance that involves the infringement of rules or laws that a specific society has created; both the act of a crime and the behavior of the criminal are therefore socially defined. The geographic study of crime draws a distinction between the geography of offences, where crimes are committed, and the geography of offenders, where criminals live. Different offences have different geographies. The places where shoplifting, robbery, and residential burglary occur are all different: the teenage mugger is likely to come from a different kind of neighborhood than the tax fraud. This diversity has stimulated study of the geography of crime at a variety of scales. Environmental criminology, with its focus on the places at which crimes occur, offers one organizing framework; the problematic concept of the 'crime area' another.

1. Origins

The origins of the geography of crime are found in early nineteenth century interest in cartographic criminology. A French statistician, Guerry (1833), produced maps showing the regional concentrations of crime. His observation that crimes of violence were disproportionately represented in the south of France led him to link criminal behavior and climate. In England, the social reformers such as Mayhew (1861–62) noted the strong clusters of crimes and criminals in specific areas of cities. Mayhew described the 'rookeries' of London where children were 'born and bred to the business of crime.' The Chicago studies of Shaw and McKay (1942) established a social science basis perspective on crime or delinquency areas, urban spatial patterns, and gradients and a set of 'theories' that underpinned the ecology of crime in the city. The basic premises were that crime had a spatial order; it was not distributed randomly but showed strong and persistent trends to cluster in poorer, disadvantaged environments. Subsequent studies have shown a remarkable persistence of these basic qualities of a geog-