

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND COMPARATIVE NETWORK ANALYSIS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Abstract: The present study uses a version of network analysis to examine the "social representations" of a group of criminologists from America and Britain about crime. The results suggests that while criminologists acknowledge the importance of broken families and lack of parental control, they perceive them as resulting from unemployment and poverty. The two groups of criminologists produce surprisingly dissimilar networks for the perceived causes of crime, and thus we would argue different social representations of crime. The most significant differences were related to the role of racial problems, with significantly more American criminologists believing it to be important in its bi-directional causal relationship with unemployment and poverty and its causal impact upon media depictions of crime.

The present study is concerned with assessing differences in the social representations of crime between American and British criminologists. There are reasons for believing that the representations of crime will be different for the two groups, as there are differences in the course of development of criminology as a discipline between the two countries. In Britain, the disciplinary study of crime began with the founding of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency (1931) and subsequently the Home Office Research Unit (1957) and the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge (1958). The discipline was marked by a dual emphasis on psychiatry on one hand and technical, statistical and management issues on the other (Cohen, 1981). The virtual exclusion of sociology was remedied in 1968 by the formation of the National Deviancy Conference who explicitly sought to question the pathologising of crime, the reliance on positivist method and to draw attention to the intrinsically ideological dimension of criminological

thought (Taylor, Walton and Young, 1973). Though the British Journal of Criminology has continued to publish traditional positivist work on crime causation and management, British sociological criminology has often been characterised as concerned with ethnographic method, subcultural/semiotic analyses and Marxist/ left realist theory. In the United States, criminology began during the Progressive Era as social workers sought to enculturate waves of newly arrived immigrants. Criminology was taught as a component of social work and subsequently sociology with the University of Chicago leading the way. Criminological thinking was driven by concerns with urban living, population migration and industrialisation. Theoretical perspectives emphasised social disorganisation, opportunity structures and informal social control. Though the seventies saw the emergence of Marxist criminology, it has never assumed the same prominence as in Britain. Criminologists in the United States largely continue to seek positivist empirical syntheses of the major theoretical positions -- social control, strain and differential association.

The differences in pattern of offending in the two countries with America showing a greater amount of violent crime, with murder being far more likely than in Britain, may also be expected to produce differences in representations of crime.

Despite these differences in disciplinary beginning and current form several factors may be expected to lead to a convergence of thinking. The increasing ease of international movement and the globalising effects of mass media have meant that problems such as drugs sales, arms trafficking and gun availability pass between nations. In addition, the information explosion has meant that academic journals, criminal statistics, public opinion polls and even attendance at international academic meetings are often trans-national.

Attempts to examine lay and practitioners assumptions about the causes of crime are not new. Previous studies range from large scale public opinion polls (Gallup, 1981; Hollin and Howells, 1987; Independent/ NOP, 1993) to smaller surveys of criminal justice personnel (Cullen, Clark, Cullen and Mathers, 1985). These studies either invite subjects to enumerate the causes of crime or offer a list of such causes to be rated or ranked for importance.

In this study we intend to actively explore the complexity of causes, in an attempt to reveal a richer social representation of crime. Network analysis is used to examine these interrelations following the original technique described by Lunt (1988). In this technique subjects indicate the presence or absence of a perceived causal relationship between pairs of variables for every pairwise combination from a given set. The pairs of variables are presented in the form of a grid with the same set of variables appearing on the top and sides of the grid. In this study all the variables had previously been identified as being suggested causes of crime. The subjects are asked to indicate the presence or absence of a perceived causal relationship between pairs of variables by entering a "1" (if they perceive a causal connection) or a "0" (if they do not perceive a causal connection). The resulting grids from all subjects are then summed. The cells in the resulting matrix contain the number of subjects endorsing a potential causal connection between previously nominated causes. This provides the data base for a graphical representation in which the putative causes are nodes and directional arrows between them indicate causal directions. Causes are classified as distal (no incoming arrows), proximal (no outgoing arrows) or mediating (both incoming and outgoing arrows). Network analysis has recently been used to elucidate a lay interpretation of crime (Campbell and Muncer, 1990), the perceived causes

of drug use (Muncer, Epro, Sidorowicz and Campbell, 1992), the perceived causes of debt (Muncer and Gillen, 1992) and to reveal sex differences in the perceived causes of date rape (Gillen and Muncer, 1995) In the present study we are attempting to reveal the pattern of relationship between causes that have already been nominated as having a causal implication in crime. In doing so we hope to do justice to the complexity of social representations of crime.

METHOD

SELECTION OF CAUSES

We first examined the criminology and social science literature for published studies which reported data on perceived causes of crime (Banks, Maloney and Willcock, 1975; Campbell and Muncer, 1990; Cullen et al, 1985; Furnham and Henderson, 1983; Gallup, 1981; Hollin and Howells, 1987; Hough and Mayhew, 1985; Lentz, 1966; NOP, 1970; Reed and Reed, 1973; Reuterman, 1978; Reuterman and Cartwright, 1976). From these we drew a list of 43 causes which were nominated by subjects or provided by researchers. This list was given to twelve lecturers who taught on criminology degree programmes in an American graduate school of criminal justice with an international reputation. These lecturers were asked to endorse those causes that they thought were most important. We selected the twelve which showed the highest frequency of endorsement. These were in descending order: lack of parental control, inadequate criminal justice system response, media depictions of crime, cultural norms supporting crime, mental illness, unemployment, racial problems, broken or dysfunctional families, poor impulse control, lack of school authority, material greed and poverty.

CONSTRUCTING THE REPRESENTATIONAL GRID

These twelve variables were used to label the columns and rows of a 12 by 12 grid. A cross was placed in the diagonal boxes to prevent check marks being placed in them. Subjects were given the following instructions.

"Crime is considered to be a major problem in (British/American) society. There are many possible reasons for crime. This questionnaire is concerned with the following reasons; lack of parental control, inadequate criminal justice response, media depictions of crime, cultural norms supporting crime, mental illness, unemployment, racial problems, broken or dysfunctional families, poor impulse control, lack of school authority, material greed, and poverty. Below you will find a grid with twelve causes and twelve effects printed. Your task is to judge whether or not the causes are likely to bring about the effects. For example, is it likely that poverty causes mental illness? If you think it is likely, put a 1 in the appropriate box. If you think it is unlikely put a 0 in the appropriate box. Please make sure you fill in all the boxes."

The grids and an accompanying cover letter and stamped addressed envelope were posted to the subjects. The accompanying letter briefly explained the purpose of the research and asked British participants to add any causes that they thought were missing and to include any other comments that they may have. This opportunity was given to the British sample as the original causes were selected by American lecturers. The letter also

advised them that the results would be sent to them at a later date for information and possible comment.

SUBJECTS

Twenty-eight criminologists who attended the 1993/4 British Criminology Conference at Cardiff participated in the study. Each received the causal grid, covering letter, and stamped addressed envelope. Thirty-six subjects from the American Society of Criminology membership list also participated in the study.

RESULTS

A composite grid was constructed for each group of subjects in which each cell represented the number of subjects, out of a possible 28 British or 36 American criminologists, endorsing a causal connection between a cause *i* and cause *j*; that is indicating a perceived causal link between the cause in the row and the cause in the column. The endorsement ranged from 0, for a link between *poor impulse control* and *media depictions of crime*, and 25 out of 28 and 33 out of 36, for a link between *unemployment* and *poverty*. The next task was to establish a cut-off criterion for eliminating poorly endorsed pathways from the final network. There were 156 theoretically possible causal links and of these all but one received some endorsement. However, the majority of the possible connections between causes were endorsed by less than fifty per cent of subjects. To include all of the endorsed connections would not, therefore, provide an accurate picture of the subjects' perceptions. In this study it was decided that a causal link should only be included in the network if it was endorsed by at least 75 per cent of all subjects. Sixteen causal links met this criterion for the American sample and they are displayed in Figure 1.

Two distinct subsystems are apparent reflecting structural and psychological forms of explanations. The structural system identifies an initial distal loop of *racial problems*, *unemployment* and *poverty*, with the bi-directional relationship between *unemployment* and *racial problems* and *poverty* and *racial problems* being worthy of note. *Poverty* impacts upon a proximal and societal-level cause of crime -- *cultural norms which support criminal behaviour* and two mediating perceived causes *mental illness* and *broken families*. *Poverty* is seen as directly causally linked to *broken families* which has its impact on crime through *lack of parental control* and subsequent *poor impulse control*. The second and psychological subsystem takes *mental illness* as its mediating cause. *Mental illness* has a direct effect upon *impulse control* as a proximal cause of crime and exerts an indirect effect through its association with *broken families*, subsequent *lack of parental control* and its resulting *poor impulse control*. It is the nexus of family structure and socialisation that unites the two explanations.

Cultural norms supporting crime also result from *material greed*. *Media depictions of crime* enter as a proximal factor among US criminologists and are seen as resulting from *racial problems*. Doubtless this link reflects the prevalence of non-whites as criminals in news reports and fictional crime programmes on television. This has been argued to increase both fear of crime and prejudice against minorities among whites and to promote a criminal identity as a route to notoriety among blacks and Latinos.

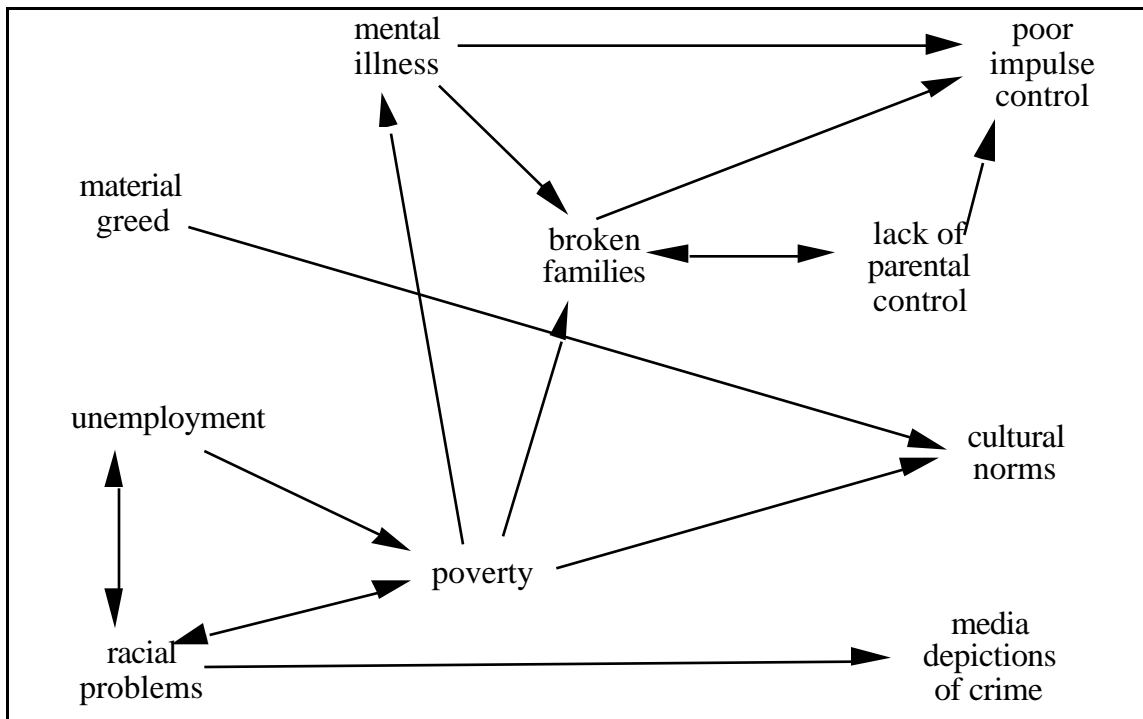


Figure 1.

Network of the American criminologists' perceptions of the causes of crime.

The British network is presented in Figure 2. At first glance the networks may appear similar, but the agreement index between networks indicates substantial differences. This is calculated by dividing the number of perceived causal links endorsed by both groups of subjects by the number of causal links endorsed by either group of subjects. If there is complete agreement the index would be 1 if there is complete disagreement the index would be 0 (Muncer, 1995). In this case the agreement index is 0.3, indicating substantial disagreement as closer examination reveals. Both *racial problems* and *material greed* drop out of the network. *Racial problems* are not causally implicated in the interaction between *poverty* and *unemployment* and neither are they a cause of *media depictions of crime*. All three links were significantly more likely to be endorsed by American than British subjects (respectively $\chi^2=6.73$, $p<0.01$, $\chi^2=10.1735$ $p<0.005$ and $\chi^2=5.34$ $p,0.025$). The other differences relate to the perceived causes of *cultural norms supporting crime*. While both groups saw them as resulting from *poverty*, British criminologists saw them as also influenced by *media depictions of crime* while US criminologists emphasised the ancillary role of *material greed*. However a chi-square test indicated that there were no significant differences for endorsement of the links between *media depictions* and *cultural norms*, and *material greed* and *cultural norms* between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

Structural and psychological factors both were seen to be distal causes of crime achieving their effect in the first case through the development of cultural norms and in the latter through an impact upon *impulse control*. It is noteworthy that structural factors

were given no proximal or direct status in crime causation -- their effects were seen as realised through culture and socialisation. It was the socialisation variables which united the two forms of explanation, perhaps helping to explain the current popularity of the family as a factor in rising crime rates. The family is a convenient nexus for both pathological and structural forms of explanation.

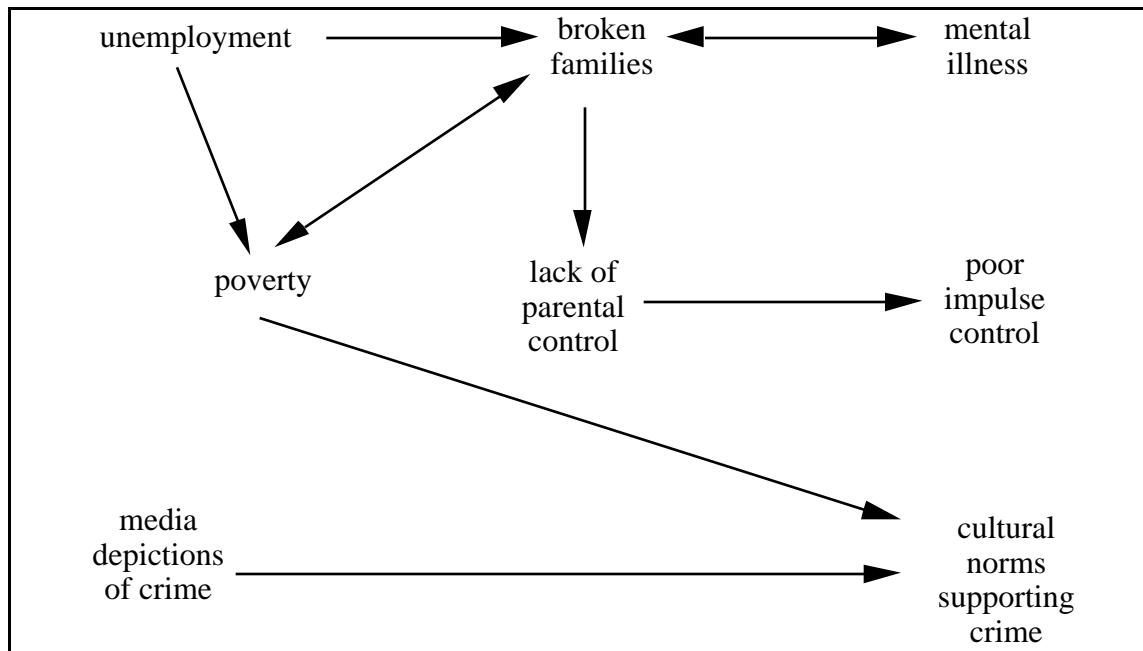


Figure 2

Network of the British criminologists' perceptions of the causes of crime.

The important proximal role given to *poor impulse control* is noteworthy. It can be traced back in US theorising to Reckless' (1961) containment theory and subsequently Hirschi's (1969) theory of social control. In both formulations, self-control was closely identified, as it is in the present study with exposure to external controls imposed by parents and other institutions of informal control. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) more recent formulation of a general theory of crime identifies self-control (the ability to defer gratification, to plan ahead, to inhibit anti-social behavioural tendencies) as a key personological component with less emphasis upon its aetiology in family experiences. This "trait" approach may explain its perceived association with mental illness in the US sample. British criminologists indicate greater support for an association with family experiences.

Cultural norms are perceived on both sides of the Atlantic to be a proximal cause of crime. In both cases they are seen as resulting from the structural variable of *poverty*. *Unemployment* was not highly endorsed as a cause of such norms except by virtue of its relationship to *poverty*. Traditionally cultural theories have emphasised a direct relationship between blocked opportunity and the development of cultural reaction and resistance (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Willis, 1977). We can only speculate as to whether

the poverty-culture (rather than unemployment-culture) link represents some support for "underclass" and "culture of poverty" explanations of cultural transmission.

The causes that were not included in the network are also of interest. None of the links to or from *inadequate criminal justice response* reached the 75 per cent endorsement level required for inclusion. Only two of its links (to *racial problems* and *cultural norms supporting crime*) were endorsed by even fifty per cent of subjects. Similarly, none of the links to or from *lack of school authority* reached the 75 per cent endorsement level, and only the link between *cultural norms supporting crime* and *lack of school authority* was endorsed by fifty per cent of subjects.

The most significant differences between the British and American criminologists' perceptions concerned the role of racial problems. American criminologists supported a link between *racial problems*, *unemployment* and *poverty* and also with *media depictions of crime*. This may be related to the larger number of races in America and the disproportionate number of Afro-Americans charged with criminal offences.

A note of caution as to whether these networks can be said to reveal social representations of crime. Clearly the features that were included limit the scope of the network and it is possible that important features have been omitted. For example, we acknowledge that we have only included features that could be perceived as causal in our "dictionary" (Galli & Fasanelli, 1994) of crime. Furthermore we would acknowledge that other perceived causes may be important. The British subjects, for example, provided four additional causes: ineffective government, racism, social indifference and masculinity/patriarchy were each suggested by only one subject. As such we believe that it is unlikely that they would have an overall effect on the network revealed, although this cannot be ruled out. For example, ineffective government may be seen as a distal cause of *unemployment*. We believe, however, that our procedure in selecting causes was rational and reasonably exhaustive given the practical limitations on the subjects' time. The choice of variables depends heavily upon the particular phenomenon to be accounted for and constrains the final explanatory model, but in that regard it is no different to any other empirical study.

In conclusion, criminologists identified a network of perceived causes that included psychological, socialisation, cultural and structural variables. Notably absent was serious concern with *inadequate criminal justice response* as playing a causal role in crime. While *broken or dysfunctional families* was seen as an important mediating cause of crime, the family does not have the well-spring status that the present British government seems to accord it. The network revealed *unemployment* and *poverty* as being the most important distal causes of crime leading as they do to *broken or dysfunctional families*, in addition to the impact of *poverty* on *cultural norms*. The most important differences between the networks revolved around the role of racial problems and influence of material greed in crime.

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