The relationship between gender and delinquency: Assessing the mediating role of anticipated guilt☆

CrossMark

Cesar J. Rebellon [a,*], Michelle E. Manasse [b], Robert Agnew [c], Karen T. Van Gundy [a], Ellen S. Cohn [d]

[a] Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, McConnell Hall, 15 Academic Way, Durham, NH 04824, United States
[b] Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice, Towson University, 8000 York Rd., Towson, MD 21252, United States
[c] Department of Sociology, Emory University, 201 Dowman Dr., Atlanta, GA 30322, United States
[d] Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, McConnell Hall, 15 Academic Way, Durham, NH 04824, United States

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Gender differences in delinquency are well-documented, with dominant explanations drawing largely on control, strain, and learning theories. We suggest that gender differences in guilt mediate a substantial portion of gender's association with delinquency over and above variables derived from these theories.
Methods: We use negative binomial regression and path analysis to test this assertion using data collected from a convenience sample of middle-school and high-school students in a Northeastern region of the United States.
Results: Results suggest that variables derived from control and learning theories may explain part of the gender gap in delinquency, but that a larger portion of the gender gap is due to gender differences in anticipated guilt.
Conclusions: Anticipated guilt appears to reflect a critical component of the explanation for why males engage in higher levels of delinquency than females, and future research should therefore pay greater attention to identifying the factors that influence interpersonal differences in the experience of guilt.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Gender is perhaps the strongest predictor of criminal behavior, with males tending to exhibit both a higher prevalence and frequency of offending (Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009). Gender differences in offending occur within all major sources of criminological data, including official, victimization, and self-report data (Lo & Zhong, 2006; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005). Such differences, however, vary significantly by offense and are most pronounced for serious and violent crimes. Given the very large gender difference in offending, it is essential that criminological theory account for the gender gap in crime.

Explanations of the gender gap in offending have largely emerged from mainstream criminology theories concerning learning, control, and strain. Most accounts suggest that males and females differ in their average levels of variables derived from these theories, but some suggest that these variables exert differential influences by gender. Learning theories (e.g., Akers, 2009) argue that males are more exposed to criminal role models, especially peers, and that these role models teach beliefs favorable to crime and differentially reinforce crime. Control theories (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) argue that males tend to experience lower levels of direct and indirect supervision, particularly in the context of the family (e.g. Hagan, Gillis, &

Simpson, 1990; Hagan, Simpson, & Gillis, 1987), resulting in lower levels of male constraint against crime. Males are likewise said to be less strongly attached to parents, less committed to school, and less likely to condemn crime (DeCoster, Heimer, & Cumley, 2013). Strain theories account for the gender gap by suggesting that males experience higher levels of those strains conducive to offending, such as victimization or negative school experiences, and are more likely to cope with strains through crime (Agnew, 2006; Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

The present study does not deny these arguments, but directs attention to a potentially important cause of gender differences in offending that has received less emphasis by mainstream theories. A central theme in the larger gender literature, particularly the literature dealing with gender socialization, roles, and identity, is that, relative to males, females are taught to place more emphasis on the care and nurture of others, compassion for others, the maintenance of close interpersonal ties, and a passive/submissive interactional style (Gilligan, 1982; Lapsley, 1996; Messerschmidt, 1993). As a consequence, females should be less likely to engage in other-directed crime; in particular, the contemplation of crime should be more likely to provoke feelings of guilt in females than males. Data provide some support for this argument, suggesting that females are more likely to experience guilt than males (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012; Ferguson & Eyre, 2000). But criminologists have largely neglected guilt when attempting to explain the gender gap in crime (although see Blackwell, 2000; Campbell, 2006; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Finley & Grasmick, 1985). This study contributes to the literature on the gender gap in offending by

focusing explicitly on the extent to which controlling for anticipated guilt reduces the gap in offending over and above variables from the leading theories.

Below, we begin by elaborating upon mainstream explanations for the gender gap in offending and reviewing existing empirical research bearing on these explanations. We then discuss why females are more likely than males to experience guilt when contemplating or engaging in other-directed crime. Finally, we provide an empirical examination of the role that guilt plays in explaining the gender gap in crime. In particular, using multiple waves of panel data collected from middle- and high-school students who participated in the New Hampshire Youth Study, we examine (a) whether females and males report different average levels of criminal offending, (b) whether females report anticipating higher levels of guilt than males for prospective offenses, and (c) whether differences in anticipated guilt mediate a portion of the gender gap net of variables from mainstream theories of crime.

Mainstream accounts of the gender gap in offending

Learning theory

According to learning theories, crime results from interactions with others who model criminal behavior, expose individuals to favorable beliefs about crime, and reinforce offending (Sutherland, 1947; Akers, 2009). According to this perspective, males' greater offending is thought to be based primarily on their greater exposure to delinquent others. Consistent with this framework, some research suggests that males are more likely than females to be exposed to delinquent peers and to hold beliefs that are favorable to delinquency (Heimer & De Coster, 1999; Jensen, 2003; Liu & Kaplan, 1999; Mears, Ploeger, & Warr, 1998). Research has further shown that gender differences in delinquent peer association and delinquent beliefs can explain a significant portion of the gender gap in delinquency (Bell, 2009; Jensen, 2003; Liu & Kaplan, 1999; Mears et al., 1998; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Preston, 2006). With few exceptions (see Svensson, 2003), however, such studies have been unable to fully account for the gap between male and female delinquency.

Additional research has examined the degree to which higher male crime and delinquency reflect greater male exposure to positive reinforcement for such behavior. In particular, both genders face pressure to uphold stereotypes that dictate appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior, including criminal behavior (see Messerschmidt, 1993; Heimer & De Coster, 1999; Jansz, 2000; Burt & Clay-Warner, 2004; Mullins, Wright, & Jacobs, 2004). Male identities are said to emphasize competitiveness, daring, and strength, while females' identities are said to emphasize empathy, caution, and submissiveness. Consistent with such arguments, masculine gender-role identity, or identification with stereotypically male roles, has been linked empirically to a higher likelihood of violent offending (Beesley & McGuire, 2009) and aggressive intentions among males (Coleman, Goldman, & Kugler, 2009). Further, research finds that males are more likely to view themselves in stereotypically masculine terms, that females are more likely to view themselves in stereotypically feminine ones, and that these differences in self-perception partially account for gender differences in delinquency (Jensen, 2003).

A final learning-based explanation for gender differences in crime and delinquency suggests that males and females are not only differentially exposed to definitions and reinforcements related to offending, but that they are differentially vulnerable to certain components of this learning process. Girls, for example, may be socialized to be more other-focused and relationship-oriented than boys, resulting in a stronger influence of others' potential disapproval on female crime (Heimer, 1996; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). Using data from the National Youth Survey, Heimer (1996) found partial support for this assertion. Although some studies have shown that the influence of delinquent peers does not vary by gender (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Moffitt

et al., 2001; Smith & Paternoster, 1987), others have reported that delinquent peers better predict delinquency for males than females (Piquero, Gover, MacDonald, & Piquero, 2005; Mears et al., 1998). Further, Mears et al. (1998) found that girls were more likely than boys to hold beliefs unfavorable to delinquency, and these differences largely accounted for the stronger influence of peer behavior on male versus female delinquency.

Although learning arguments do not focus specifically on guilt, they are compatible with the idea that guilt may help explain gender differences in crime. Females could be more likely than males to experience guilt at least partly for reasons described by social learning theory; they are more likely to learn beliefs and identities opposed to crime and are more likely to face consequences for violating "feminine" norms of behavior. The contemplation of crime would therefore be more likely to provoke guilt among females, acting as a major form of punishment and thus constraining their offending relative to males.

Control theory

In contrast to learning theory, control theory begins with the premise that crime often satisfies an individual's immediate self-interests and, therefore, that no extrinsic learning is necessary to motivate crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Rather than attempting to identify social forces that promote the learning of crime, control theory identifies those social forces that constrain individuals' natural pursuit of immediate gratification. Control theories suggest that males have higher rates of offending than females because they have weaker social bonds to society, are subject to lower levels of external supervision or discipline among parents and other authority figures, and are therefore lower in self-control than their female counterparts (Costello & Mederer, 2003; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Heimer & De Coster, 1999).

Existing research provides partial support for social control theory explanations of the gender gap in crime. In comparison to females, for example, juvenile males tend to be less strongly attached to conventional others, less constrained from crime by peers, less committed or attached to conventional institutions like school, and less supervised by parents (Bottcher, 2001; Costello & Mederer, 2003; Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002; McCarthy, Felmlee, & Hagan, 2004; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1991). However, while research indicates that weaker social bonds among males may account for a portion of their greater delinquency, it does not suggest that these bonds can account fully for gender differences in offending (Bell, 2009; Booth, Farrell, & Varano, 2008). The role of guilt has not been considered within social control arguments.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime argues that consistent parental monitoring and sanctioning of inappropriate behavior promotes the development of self-control in early childhood. According to these theorists, interpersonal differences in self-control remain stable after the first decade of life and crime results when individuals low in self-control encounter criminal opportunities. By extension, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory suggests that gender differences in crime reflect gender differences in parental discipline, such that girls are more consistently sanctioned for rule violations, thus leading them to develop higher levels of self-control than males. Some empirical evidence provides partial support for these assertions. Svensson (2003), for example, found that parental monitoring was significantly associated with juvenile drug and alcohol use, and that gender differences in these behaviors were significantly reduced when controlling for parental monitoring. Looking directly at the role of self-control in the gender gap, Burton, Cullen, Evans, Alarid, & Dunaway (1998) found that gender differences in a 20-item scale of self-reported crime among adults were fully explained when self-control was included in the statistical model (see also Higgins & Tewksbury, 2006; Moffitt et al., 2001; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003). However, other studies find that males are more likely to engage in both violence and property crime even when adjusting statistically for self-control (e.g., LaGrange &