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Three Drivers of Criminal Behavior: Self-Control, Social Forces, and Moral Disengagement

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Abstract. This review attempts to synthesize the current scientific support for three drivers of criminal behavior. The first driver includes the limitations in executive control and the steeper discount rates, which are associated with increased risky behavior. The second driver includes the influence of social forces, such as peer approval, social status, and fear of rejection, which are associated with a decrease in caution, especially in adolescence and in the context of the Internet. The third driver includes moral disengagement, which involves a cognitive rationalization of harming others. The three drivers have been shown to increase the likelihood of criminal behavior using a series of meta-analytic and longitudinal studies.

Keywords: Criminal Behavior, Self-Control, Social Forces, Moral Disengagement, Executive Function

1. Introduction

What are the most direct drivers of criminal behavior? Research suggests that there are three drivers of criminal behavior, and they are as follows: the first driver includes the limitations in executive control and the steeper discount rates, which are associated with increased risky behavior; the second driver includes the influence of social forces, such as peer approval, social status, and fear of rejection, which are associated with a decrease in caution, especially in adolescence and in the context of the Internet; and the third driver includes moral disengagement, which involves a cognitive rationalization of harming others.

2. Self-control, delay discounting, and short-term benefits

Recent research indicates that antisocial individuals, who are usually involved in some form of crime, have lower executive function capacity compared to the rest of the population. These include inhibition, working memory, and flexibility. Although there are differences between the groups, as indicated by the research, the differences are not significant enough to be the sole determinant of antisocial behavior. Inhibition, working memory, and flexibility are the components of executive function, and the differences between the groups are small to moderate, indicating that they are not enough to be the sole determinant of antisocial behavior [1,2]. When the control group is not matched to the criteria of the antisocial individuals, the difference is more significant, while the difference is small when the groups are matched to the criteria of the antisocial individuals [2].

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Although the executive function deficits are not enough to be the sole determinant of antisocial behavior, they are enough to raise the risk of the individuals engaging in criminal activity.

Inhibitory control being lower means that resisting smaller-sooner rewards becomes more difficult (e.g., low guardianship), which supports the capacity-based explanation. Results show that EF enhances the likelihood but not the certainty of an event [2]. Strong cues and low guardianship create a high crime likelihood for people, especially those with low EF, as they are more susceptible to the same cues. In the three main types of EF tasks, which include Go/No-Go and Stop-Signal for inhibitory control, Digit Span and N-back for working memory, and task-switching/set-shifting for cognitive flexibility, offending and high-risk groups show more commission errors, slower response times, missed targets, and perseverance in the same tasks.

Another area that has been researched is delay discounting—the rate at which people discount delayed rewards. This refers to the rate at which people discount delayed rewards. The rate at which people discount delayed rewards has been researched. It has been observed that people who make more "today" choices in options such as "choose $50 today or $90 next month" have a steeper discount rate. This has been observed to co-vary with externalizing behaviors and risky actions. This discounting rate has also been observed to be trans-diagnostically related and not related to any single disorder or label. This has been observed by [3,4]. This can be related to the situation where people are more likely to ignore long-term costs and focus on short-term gains. This can be related to the situation where people take quick money to get rid of a stolen item and focus on the long-term cost of getting caught and going to jail. It has been observed that impatience and risk preference predict property and financial offenses even after controlling for IQ and family background. People who are more impatient and have a high preference for taking risks and focusing on short-term gains are more likely to commit property and financial crimes. These crimes usually involve a trade-off between short-term gains and long-term costs. This can be directly related to the preference that people have for short-term gains. People who are more impulsive and have a high preference for taking risks are more likely to commit crimes. This can be related to the situation where people have a high preference for taking risks and have limited controls.

Nevertheless, not all studies have equal degrees of findings, just like in group differences/effect sizes in EF/discounting tasks. Matching studies according to specific psychiatric symptoms that relate to executive function and impulsivity have shown that results tend to become more similar [2]. The results of the EF gap were reduced when studies were matched for ADHD symptoms. This shows that there is shared variance with clinical factors. A new meta-analysis found no clear impact of acute stress on monetary delay discounting. This shows that discounting is more influenced by stable traits and conditions than acute states [5].

In both clinical and justice systems, there is clear evidence that limited brain function in self-control and executive function is a powerful risk driver. In substance abuse treatment studies, self-reported impulsivity and objective inhibitory control are predictors of aggression in patients. This shows that deficits in self-control are not just subjective states but objective states that are linked with aggression [6]. Neurocognitive studies of intimate partner violence (IPV) also show clear support for limited self-control and executive function [7,8]. Intersubject comparisons of first-time and repeat offenders show small but consistent differences in executive and social cognition in all brain networks. This shows that these functional limitations may play a role in recidivism [8].

Theoretical models of self-control have proposed that self-control may be broadened to incorporate comorbidity and developmental considerations in accordance with empirical findings [9].

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Given that brain function is a developing process, earlier development of reward systems and later development of control systems increase now-bias in response to peer presence [3,10]. It is the same teenager who is hesitant to engage in a risky behavior when alone, only to engage in that same risky behavior when in front of their friends cheering them on. Yet, this discount is not static in nature. There are a variety of interventions that can be used to change this. Episodic future thinking, or imagining one's future in a vivid manner, can decrease this discount rate, resulting in delayed choices, whereas inhibition/working memory training can be used to improve self-regulation in everyday life [11,12]. In a lab setting, where a teenager is in a driving simulator with their friends, they make more risky passes, or "yellow-light" runs, in front of their friends than they do when they are alone, whereas adults do not increase these risky runs in response to peer presence.

3. Social forces: peer influence, status, and rejection

In longitudinal studies, peer modeling and approval are shown to prospectively lead to rule-breaking behaviors because peers are shown to affect future behaviors, even after controlling for (or accounting for) what variables [13]? In a comprehensive longitudinal meta-analysis, it was found that individuals are influenced in their behaviors by their peers/friends, and this influence can be traced into future behavioral trends. Even after accounting for similarity between individuals, peers are shown to actively affect individuals' behaviors in the future [13]. For example, if a teenager's friends engage in shoplifting or vaping, the individual would be more inclined to engage in the behavior a few months down the line, even after accounting for their previous similarity in behaviors to their friends. This effect of peers would be more pronounced in individuals when specific norms are established among their groups of peers that are frequently promoted among them. For example, if a group of peers establishes the norm that "drinking is cool," individuals would tend to follow the norm established among their peers [14]. Peer norms recode what's "normal," shifting decision thresholds to take risks. In terms of methodology, longitudinal network studies examine whether friends' behaviors at Time 1 predict the individual's behaviors at Time 2, as shown in chat room studies and confederate peer studies, showing that viewing peers' behaviors increases willingness to take risks.

Being rejected or excluded by other people also contributes to one's behavior. This is because when an individual feels excluded, they will be more aggressive and will also be less likely to help others. This is shown in many studies and research. This is, however, not an isolated case, as shown by the meta-analytic results, which show that the same results are obtained across different studies and research designs [15]. These behaviors are also more common during an individual's adolescent years, when the need for acceptance and status is higher, as shown by [10,16]. For instance, when an individual is excluded by their friends in a group chat, they may end up posting a hostile message or even join a stunt to gain more status [17]. Exclusion, status threat, and audience are all social factors that contribute to an individual's offending behavior by increasing reward sensitivity and reducing caution, especially during an individual's adolescent years, as well as when an individual is online. In experiments, exclusion is usually done by using a virtual game called Cyberball, where the individual is then made to inflict harsher punishments, such as loud noise blasts, and also be less helpful, such as picking up dropped objects.

Influence flows both online and offline in the social world, and the influence of the online world can be described as follows: new longitudinal studies have found that if an adolescent receives online peer support for illegal behavior, the likelihood of the adolescent engaging in the behavior will increase [18]. This channel of influence can also enhance the influence of offline peers who engage in delinquent behavior, creating a double channel of influence. If the situation does not

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impose restrictions, the high-risk individual who has been influenced by the drives will be more inclined to give it a try. Both online and offline channels of influence increase the exposure of the high-risk youth to the drives, which in turn lowers the thresholds for engaging in the behavior [19]. Parental monitoring and structured time can act as a buffer for these effects.

There are also buffering factors. Parental supervision was again supported as a protective factor in a sample of adolescents, reducing peer influence [20]. There are also adaptive changes in the attitudes that adolescents take towards their parents and peers across time. These risky behaviors are fluid, meaning they are neither constant nor unchanging, but are contextual in nature. One cannot program prevention/intervention strategies to a static entity, so one must adapt [21]. An example of this would be having a weekend curfew, activities, and adult-supervised "hang-time." School, parents, peers, all at once and separately, contribute to the behaviors [22,23]. School, parents, peers, all at once and separately, contribute to exposure/supervision that can augment or buffer limits of capacity when opportunity strikes; monitoring is typically measured on a very small scale (e.g., "My parents know where I am and who I am with") but always reduces peer influence.

Additionally, peer exclusion/high pressure will also contribute to higher levels of risk. This is especially true in the adolescent population. Offenders are typically, or at least more so, subject to the same level of peer exclusion/high pressure [13,17-19]. This brings up the final factor: moral disengagement. When high pressure exists, self-control is weak, but moral disengagement can provide that final "push" into delinquent behavior because it rationalizes the bad choice [24,25]. When one is under pressure and self-control is weak, rationalization can provide that final "push."

4. Moral disengagement: switching off guilt

Moral disengagement refers to a cognitive rationalizing process that decreases guilt by rationalizing that no one is hurt, everyone does it, or that it's all just a joke. It has been measured by self-report scales that assess the cognitive mechanisms. It has been shown that a high level of moral disengagement can predict future aggression and antisocial behavior even after controlling for past behavior. This shows that it has an independent contribution as a risk factor for future aggression and antisocial behavior. According to [25], moral disengagement can reframe harm by justification, euphemism, comparison, displaced responsibility, minimized consequences, and victim-blame. For example, an individual can rationalize that harassing another person is 'just a joke,' which reframes the harm and decreases guilt. Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale and judgment of vignette studies have been used as a measure. A judgment study asks people whether they find an act more or less acceptable with or without rationalizations. A high level of judgment has been shown to predict future aggression and bystander inaction.

Longitudinal studies of classrooms show that there can be a collective moral disengagement in the classroom. Individual moral disengagement and bystander behavior in the classroom can be predicted one month later by the overall classroom's moral disengagement and classroom climate. Shared group beliefs and values will become individual behavior and thinking patterns over time [26,27]. The scripts that are developed at the classroom level, where "everybody does it," can become the scripts that guide the individual's behavior and thinking patterns, including bystander behavior. Numerous studies use the overall individual scores to create a new score, the "class-level collective disengagement" score, and show that the classroom climate can prospectively predict each individual's bystander behavior (intervene or not intervene).

Online settings create greater psychological distance (others and consequences are not as immediate), yet group cues (likes, humor) persist. Repeatedly seeing "harmless" labels on cyber aggression/online harassment normalizes the behavior. Group cues, such as the attitude/humor,

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persist online rather than decaying over time. Cyber aggression/online harassment is framed as "jokes" or "regular stuff" and becomes ambiguous to individuals' moral compass. Seeing repeated "fails/pranks" framed as harmless normalizes cyberbullying. When individuals are exposed to high-risk information, they are more likely to dissociate from morals and perceive lower risks. The majority of studies have been conducted on samples of students/adolescents, yet the pathway is reduced by having more media literacy, as this helps them recognize the harm of the frames [24]. The evidence from numerous studies across diverse cultures and methodologies unequivocally supports that dissociation from morals predicts aggression/bullying, often serving as a mediator between group norms and individual behavior. In other words, group norms affect individuals' behavior through the level of dissociation from morals, and this is expressed cognitively [28-31]. In reframing studies, where participants are exposed to hostile messages that are labeled as "just joking" to normalize them, participants are more willing to share these messages compared to control groups, yet this is reduced by literacy prompts.

Moral disengagement is also relevant to non-violent misconducts. In the context of white-collar workplace settings, ease, "no real victim," and normalization of thinking may create ambiguity and justification for misconducts. The formal nature of language, routines, and rules may make misconducts seem reasonable or "legitimate" [32]. Moral disengagement is also relevant in the context of daily life, which is more challenging to identify because it is built on self-control limits and social signals. In the context of low self-control and high social signals, rapid cognitive reframing is the tipping point. The integration of moral disengagement is also supported by the environment. Therefore, targetable prevention must yield in these high-risk settings [33,13,25]. The research methods include vignette experiments, where employees or business students read organizational scenarios, such as rounding numbers, with or without justifications, and rationalized scenarios show higher willingness to offend and lower harm.

Teach and label rationalizations (e.g., "no real victim," "everyone does it") and counter-scripts (who is harmed, how to fix) and pair these with victim impact and restorative approaches to minimize space for easy excuses [34,35]. There are no silver bullets but rather several levers that address the essence of moral disengagement: how one thinks about their behavior.

In conclusion, moral disengagement is a standard cognitive mechanism that enables individuals to alleviate guilt through reframing harm; offending contexts merely elevate or prolong its occurrence, especially when self-control is low and social influence is high [24,25,36].

5. Conclusion

The combined evidence from studies of EF/discounting, social forces, and moral disengagement points to three probabilistic causes of criminal behavior. Each of these factors individually and interactively increases risk but in no case determines outcome; effects are stronger when opportunities are salient and guardianship is low. Mechanistically, these factors interact: capacity constraints make delayed rewards irresistible; peer and status factors normalize similar behavior; and moral disengagement eliminates guilt—together tipping behavior. To inform practice, a multilevel approach holds the most promise: (1) self-control enhancements (episodic future thinking; brief inhibition and working memory exercises), (2) social supervision (parental monitoring; structured adult-supervised time and prosocial peer group norms), and (3) cognitive debiasing (instruction in recognizing and countering rationalizations of "no real victim" and "everyone does it," and victim impact and restorative practices). Limitations of our review include small- to moderate-sized effects, heterogeneous outcome variables, and many student-based studies. Future studies should include tests of multicomponent programs in preregistered longitudinal studies

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(including online-based studies), use of ecological momentary assessment for tipping points in real-time studies, and examination of platform-level factors (e.g., slowing share rates when users indicate "just joking") in addition to counter-scripts in the classroom.

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