CAUSES OF CRIME
Uncovering a Lay Model

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This exploratory study examines the independent variables identified by a group of non-criminologists as being responsible for crime and describes the perceived causal connections between them. Sociological causes are more frequently invoked than are psychological factors. Network analysis reveals an implicit model composed of distal, mediating, and proximal causes. Two subsystems are identified, corresponding to societal and personal crime pathways. They are united by the perceived relationship between poverty and drug use.

C rime is an issue which touches the lives of the general public. Public perception of crime has been examined with respect to a number of issues, such as the impact of media reporting and representations (Cook, 1971; Dominick, 1973, 1978; Graber, 1980), the accuracy of public estimates of prevalence (Warr, 1982), public ratings of crime seriousness (Gottfredson, 1981; Rossi, Waite, Bose, & Berk, 1974), and the impact of fear of crime on life-styles (Garofalo, 1979; Lewis & Maxfield, 1980). Perceptual criminology recognizes that the crime problem ranks highly in the public's political agenda. Prevailing views of crime rates and stereotypes of criminals impact on public support for criminal justice programs and the willingness of employers and neighbors to assist in community-based efforts to prevent crime and reintegrate offenders (Duffee & Ritti, 1977; Reuterman, 1978).

This article is concerned with lay models of crime causation. Although the method we employ is novel, previous studies have examined public views of causal factors in crime. These ranged from

large-scale public opinion polls (Banks, Maloney, & Willcock, 1975; Gallup, 1981; McIntyre, 1967; "Ourselves," 1976; N.O.P. Market Research Ltd., 1970) to smaller surveys of criminal justice personnel and special groups (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985; Peters 1969; Reuterman & Cartwright, 1976). These studies either invited subjects to enumerate the causes of crime or offered a list of such causes to be rated or ranked for importance. There is widespread agreement that respondents show considerable overlap in their choice of perceived causes (Banks et al., 1975; Reuterman, 1978), that it is rare to find a single cause nominated by a majority of subjects (Reuterman, 1978), and that there are few systematic differences as a function of respondent sex, age, and social class (Banks et al., 1975; Furnham & Henderson, 1983; Lentz, 1966). Furthermore, most studies conclude that crime is seen as springing from a multiplicity of causes (Flanagan, Van Alstyne, & Gottredson, 1982; Harris, 1968). Furnham and Henderson (1983) factor-analyzed commonly held lay explanations and found six distinct types of explanation which they called "defective education," "mentally unstable," "temptation," "excitement," "alienation," and "parents."

While recognizing the complexity of the public's views of crime causation, studies to date have not pursued the nature of this complexity. An exception is the work of Carroll and Payne (1977) who drew from attribution theory the three key dimensions used to infer the causes of success and failure: locus (internal-external cause), stability (enduring-temporary cause), and controllability (within-beyond the individual's control). These dimensions were used as key variables in a study of parole decisions. By systematically manipulating these variables in criminal history vignettes, Carroll and Payne established that "internal-external attributional judgements are important for general evaluative/punishment issues, while stable-unstable attributional judgements are important for predictions of recidivism risk" (p. 206). Furthermore in comparing laypersons (students) with professionals (parole board members) they concluded that essentially the same attributional strategy was used. The present study also aims to explore the interdependence of causes but differs in a number of important respects.

First, we focus on *crime as a social phenomenon* rather than criminality as an individual trait. Second, Carroll and Payne supplied their subjects with criminogenic causes by manipulating the presence of such variables in scenarios. The present study *elicits* causal hypotheses from the subjects themselves. We believe that the causes identified by a population can be as revealing as the strength of their relationship to a given outcome. The attribution of crime to individual free will is both logically and empirically related to a conservative criminal justice philosophy of incarceration and social defense while an "environmental" attribution of crime is associated with a rehabilitative orientation (Carroll & Payne, 1977; Cullen et al., 1985). By allowing subjects to nominate their own causal "hunches," we can gain insight into the implicit orientation of a given population toward the crime problem. We aim, however, to go beyond the mere enumeration of causes which have characterized previous work in this area (Banks et al., 1975; Furnham & Henderson, 1983; Reuterman, 1978). Third, attributional studies employ a dimensional methodology and analysis; they demonstrate the importance of variety of judgmental dimensions, such as locus, stability, and controllability, to a given causal attribution (Meyer, 1980; Passer, Kelley, & Michela, 1978). While acknowledging the complexity of the attributional process, they do not examine the temporal or causal precedence of one factor over another (Brickman, Ryan, & Wortman, 1975). In contrast, this study explicitly examines *causal chains*, recognizing that subjects not only view outcomes as multiply determined but are capable of specifying the links by which these distal, mediating, and proximal causes can contribute to a phenomenon (Hargreaves, 1980; Kelley, 1983).

Network analysis (see Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982, for a fuller description) is used to examine these interrelations, following the technique described by Lunt (1988). Subjects indicate the presence or absence of a perceived causal relationship between pairs of variables for every pairwise combination from a given set. The cells of the resulting matrix contain the number of subjects endorsing a potential causal connection. This provides the data base for a graphical representation in which the putative causes are nodes and directional arrows between them indicate causal direction.

METHOD

STUDY 1

The subjects were 29 members of an introductory psychology class at a suburban community college. In a free-response format, they were asked to provide six major causes of crime. Specifically, the instructions were as follows:

> This task is part of a larger study on the causes of crime. *Please list in the spaces provided below the six major causes of crime in the United States.* We know that you are not crime "experts." We are interested in your personal opinions as members of society. Do not write your name on this sheet of paper. Your answers are anonymous and confidential.

This procedure resulted in 182 nominated causes which were classified into 33 distinct causal categories.

STUDY 2

The development of the research instrument and the subject instructions followed Lunt (1988). The 10 most commonly cited causes taken from the pilot study were poverty, mental illness, lack of education, drug use, broken or bad family, greed, unemployment, peer pressure, bad neighborhood, and feelings of anger or revenge. These variables were used to label the 10 rows and 10 columns of a matrix. The rows were labeled "causes" and the columns, "possible effects." The subject instructions were as follows:

> Crime is a major problem in American society. There are many possible reasons for crime. This questionnaire is concerned with the following reasons: poverty, mental illness, lack of education, drug use, broken or bad families, greed, unemployment, peer pressure, bad neighborhoods, and feelings of anger or revenge. Below you will find a grid with 10 causes and 10 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 box. Please make sure you fill in all the boxes.

The number of putative causes was restricted to 10 since this resulted in 90 causal pathways to be evaluated. More than 90 items would have been too great a burden on the subjects in terms of both time and attention. The subjects were the same as those participating in Study 1. Two matrices were incomplete and were dropped from analysis, resulting in an N of 27.

RESULTS

The data matrices from subjects were aggregated to form a composite 10×10 grid. The number in each cell represented the number of subjects (out of a possible 27) who endorsed the existence of a causal connection between row i and column j. This number was treated as a measure of the consensual strength of each causal link.

The aggregated matrix was subjected to network analysis (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982). Each node represents a perceived cause, and directional arrows indicate a perceived causal relationship between two causes. Two techniques were employed to establish a criterion for inclusion or exclusion of variables into the final network (Lunt, 1988). "Minimum system criterion" placed the cutoff point at the highest value at which all causes were included in the network with at least one link. This assumed that the causes form a single unitary system. If two or more subsystems existed, however, a decision to drop the criterion low enough to include all causes could result in overspecification of most of the causes. This was the case for the present data where the minimum system criterion of 23 indicated the presence of two subsystems. To clarify the network, a second criterion of exclusion was used. The number of links was examined as a function of the link strength each time that a new cause was added to the system. The aim was to express the network as economically as possible, that is, to exclude those causes whose addition would result in a substantial jump in the number of links required. The criterion came at the inclusion of 7 causes requiring 7 links and a minimum endorse-
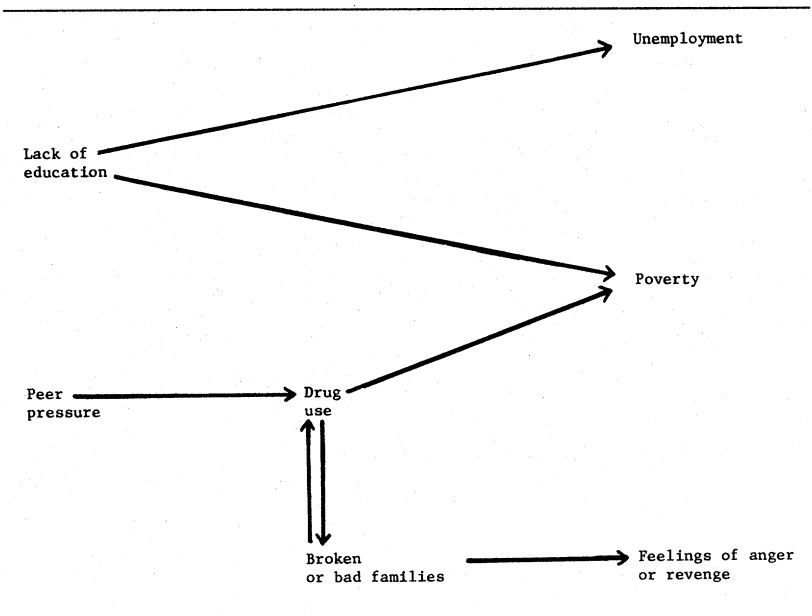
Figure 1: Lay model of crime causation.

ment by 26 of the 27 subjects. (The inclusion of an eighth cause required 11 links; 9 causes, 16 links; and all 10 causes, 17 links.) The result of the network analysis is shown in Figure 1. Following Lunt (1988), causes were classified as distal (no incoming arrows), proximal (no outgoing arrows), and mediating (both incoming and outgoing arrows).

DISCUSSION

Examination of the 33 causes of crime indicated that more societal or external factors were cited than psychological or personal motives. Of the 182 nominations made, 102 were given to 19 societal factors. In decreasing order of nomination, these were poverty (26), bad families (22), lack of education (15), unemployment (8), peer pressure (7), bad neighborhood (7), racial tension (3), race (2), criminal opportunity (2), crowding (1), cities (1), government policy on drugs (1) and

gun control (1), criminal justice leniency (1), public apathy (1), teenage pregnancy (1), schools (1), media (1), and crimes of the powerful (1).

By contrast, 80 nominations were for 14 personal or psychological factors: drug use (20), mental illness (16), feelings of anger or revenge (9), greed (8), alcohol use (7), the "thrill" of crime (4), boredom (4), the "urge" to commit crime (2), need for parental attention (2), low self-esteem (2), laziness (2), sex drive (2), genetics (1), and political motives (1). In keeping with the lay criminal personality profiles reported by Reed and Reed (1973), these psychological variables simultaneously suggest both maladjustment (mental illness, drug use, low self-esteem) and evil (laziness, greed, anger). While the former may be logically related to a rehabilitation orientation, the latter form a logical basis for the punishment orientation currently in vogue (Cullen et al., 1985; Reed & Reed, 1973).

The causal network indicated the presence of two subsystems, with the relation between poverty and drug use acting as nexus. One seemed to correspond to a *societal* explanation, which views unemployment and poverty as proximate causes of crime, both resulting from lack of education. The second system, at a more *psychological* level of analysis, viewed feelings of anger and revenge as the proximate cause of crime. These feelings result from poor family relations which interact with drug use. The distal cause in this system was peer pressure to use drugs. The two systems may also correspond implicitly to a distinction between adult career criminals and the more transient phenomenon of juvenile delinquency. In either case, it was drug use which connected them, producing either financial hardship or family breakdown.

The model indicated that for the layperson, education and drug use are important areas of intervention for crime reduction policy. Both are seen to contribute to poverty. In addition, drugs were seen as having an erosive impact on the family unit and thus on the emotional health of its members. The recent "War on Drugs" declared by President Bush, together with his avowed determination to be seen as the "education president," suggest that the administration has accurately read the mood of the times, at least as reflected by the present sample. But perhaps what is lacking from the model is even more

revealing than what was included. Recent political rhetoric notwith-standing, we saw little attention given to criminal justice variables by this population. The standard politicians' explanations of crime (in-sufficient police, lax penalties, and too few prisons) were noticeably absent from these students' conception of the causes of crime.

Given the limited sample size, it would be premature to place too much weight on the substantive results. Research now underway will replicate this study with a larger sample. What we can conclude is that the network analysis technique and the matrix questionnaire on which it is based furnish a useful means of tapping complex social models. Kelley (1983) called for research on attribution which would go beyond the confines of the ANOVA model (Kelley, 1967) to investi-gate complex interrelations of causes encompassing structural prop-erties, such as direction (past to future), extent (proximal to distal), and patterning (simple to complex). Antaki (1985) and Campbell and Muncer (1987) were able to recover chain-like connections of causes from conversational data, but the rigors of performing content analysis on hundreds of pages of conversational transcript preclude the use of such techniques for large samples and for subjects not in face-to-face interaction. The present technique opens the way for the examina-tion of both societal-level causal beliefs shared by large numbers of people (Hewstone, 1988) and Wells's (1981) concept of "socialized processing"—the means by which individuals adopt and internalize cultural hypotheses about cause. The high degree of consensus (evi-dent in the fact that the *weakest* link in the crime causation graph was endorsed by 26 of 27 subjects) clearly suggests that these subjects' causal hypotheses are derived from a common cultural experience.

The specifics of the model are likely to be intimately tied to the question that is posed. Had "criminality" been substituted for "crime," more psychological variables might have been elicited. Indeed, the distinction made by Schutz (1932) and elaborated by Hargreaves (1980) between "because-motives" and "in-order-to-motives" might have been more apparent. In addition, Hollin and Howells (1987) demonstrated that subjects make a causal distinction between sexual assault and economic crimes, seeing the former as more dependent on mental instability and the latter as resulting from inadequate education and parenting. Even greater differences might be elicited if accounts

of white-collar crimes were contrasted with "street crimes." The present technique opens the door to a more fine-grained examination of the implicit models of specific crimes held by criminal justice practitioners and the general public.

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