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THE EFFECT OF COMMUNICATIVE IMPEDIMENTS ON INTERPERSONAL ATTACHMENT AND DEVIANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a theory describing the relationship between factors that increase social isolation and deviance. The theory is examined in the context of virtual visitation. We integrate social exchange, anomie, and strain theories to argue that as communication is impeded between two actors, the less satisfied either will be with the communication and thus, the more alienated they may become. Social alienation, in turn, may make actors more inclined to commit deviance. Findings have important implications for a broad set of applied settings including correctional facilities that have replaced in-person contact visits with virtual visits.

INTRODUCTION

America's prison and jail population is rapidly increasing. Currently, well over two million adults are incarcerated in federal, state and local correctional facilities (BJS, 2008). For nearly all these inmates, face-to-face contact with the outside world is significantly restricted. Consequently, inmates are isolated from their families and friends and must rely on periodic visits to maintain personal contact. In recent years however, a growing number of America's correctional facilities have replaced in-person contact visits with *virtual visits*. For inmates in these institutions, meetings are no longer face-to face, but instead take place over a video screen. The impact of this virtual form of visitation on the emotional attachment between inmates and their visitors has not been studied and is not currently known. It is understood however, that virtual communication lacks "media richness" in comparison to face-to-face interaction (de Pillis & Furumo, 2007). Communication using a video screen diminishes the visibility of non verbal cues including subtle facial expressions, body posture or faint olfactory signals. It also eliminates the possibility of interpersonal contact. Research has shown that the consequences associated with these deficits include misinterpreted messages, decreased trust and commitment as well as diminished satisfaction with the interaction (Straus & McGrath, 1994; Watson-Manheim & Belanger, 2002).

In what follows, we introduce a theory describing the relationship between factors that increase social isolation and deviance. We argue that over time, any feature of a social exchange setting

that creates impediments to interaction, including aspects of communication that isolate actors by decreasing the fulfillment of the interaction between them and significant others, also diminishes the strength of social bonds between actors and their visitors. It is well understood that people who experience weakened bonds or attachments with others are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior than their counterparts (Hirschi, 1969). Consequently, impediments to interaction contribute to increases in behavior that violates accepted mores. We believe that virtual visitation is one such impediment, and use it to illustrate this process. In the following sections, we review the relevant literature and present our theory.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Exchange Theory

The genesis of social exchange theory can be traced to the works of several early contributors including, Homans (1961), Thibaut and Kelley (1959), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1962, 1972). These works blended rational choice and reinforcement processes to explain how actors in a social setting exchange valued items.

Social exchange differs from purely economic theory in a fundamental way. Traditionally, micro economic theory assumes that sequential exchanges are independent events. Social exchange theory, however, takes the recurring exchange relation as its subject matter (Molm & Cook, 1995). Exchange is a joint activity that is often built up over time. The perspective assumes that self interested actors exchange with other self interested actors in order to reach goals they could not achieve alone (Lawler & Thye, 1999). The outcomes of exchange serve as reinforcement contingencies that foster the connection. Consequently, the exchange relationship is the smallest unit of analysis.

Recently, Lawler (2001) proposed an affect theory of social exchange. The theory moves beyond current theorizing that conceptualizes rational choice and reinforcement as the primary processes that mediate structural exchange opportunities. Instead, the theory argues outcome of exchange produces global emotions which are involuntary, primitive and nonspecific feelings that are not immediately attached to particular social objects (Lawler, Thye & Yoon, 2000). If the outcome of exchange is successful, actors feel good; if the outcome is unsuccessful, they feel bad (Lawler & Thye, 1999). The emotions generated by exchange function as internal self reinforcing or punishing stimuli. Actors try to reproduce positive global feelings and avoid negative global emotions. These emotions also trigger cognitive efforts to explain their source. Actors involved in joint exchange tasks attribute these emotions to their exchange relations or groups. Lawler (2001) notes that the fundamental implication of these assumptions is that successful exchange increases group cohesion and unsuccessful exchange reduces it. Cohesion is defined as the strength and durability of person to person and person to group relations.

Anomie

A long tradition of work in sociology describes and explains the association between social integration and antisocial behavior. Durkheim specifies how deviance is mediated by two social processes. *Egoism* is a feeling of purposelessness due to a lack of social integration and *anomie*

is negative emotion and cognition generated by weak normative regulation of behavior. Although there is slippage related to the meanings of these terms, (see Bearman, 1991), several theorists argue that egoism and anomie are two sides of the same coin (Gibbs & Martin, 1964; Johnson, 1965). For them, social integration is a precondition for regulation. The latter cannot exist without the former. Durkheim felt that the more individuals interact in social systems subsumed by strong social relationships, the more likely they are to become attached to others and the less likely they are to carry out antisocial behavior (Stockard & O'Brien, 2002).

Although the study of homicides and suicides has developed in different sub-disciplines and literatures (Stockard & O'Brien, 2002), Durkheim believed the causes of suicide and homicide in complex modern societies are “parallel” and stem from anomie or egoism (Stockard & O'Brien, 2002). Durkheim specified four sources or factors that lead to suicide. *Egoistic* suicide results from excessive individualism and occurs when the ties connecting the individual to society or others are weak. In essence, there are so few bonds linking the person to society that nothing is left to prevent the person from self destructive behavior. *Altruistic* suicide is caused by too much social integration. These people are so firmly connected to society that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of the collective. Durkheim specified several categories of *anomic* suicide. Although somewhat varied, each of these categories share the common assumption that suicide occurs when a sense of normlessness generates a disjunction between goals and means until finally, people discover they lack the wherewithal to fulfill their needs. *Fatalistic* suicide results from excessive regulation of norms. Durkheim believed this was a rare phenomenon that occurred when the individual perceived no hope of relief from the oppressive regulation brought on by society. Although Durkheim's discussion of homicides is somewhat indistinct and ambiguous, his core argument specifies that (at least for modern social systems), the more strongly individuals are integrated into and regulated by society, the less likely they will be to experience any type of lethal violence whether it be suicide or homicide (Stockard & O'Brien, 2002).

Strain Theory

This tradition traces its roots to Durkheim and holds that delinquency and deviance occur when individuals experience strain because they are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Early formulations, including Merton, argued that deviance resulted from anomie or normlessness produced by a disjunction between economic goals and structurally determined channels for achieving these outcomes. When faced with this disjunction, people may choose non-normative methods for achieving the culturally accepted goal of becoming wealthy. These “innovators” resort to crime or deviance to manage strain. More recently, Agnew (1992) extends these ideas by suggesting first, that negative experiences are key in generating deviant behavior because, among other things, strain or the failure to achieve positively valued outcomes produces negative emotion which leads to deviant behavior (Kaufman, Rebellon, Thaxton & Agnew, 2008). And second, that individuals who are subject to repetitive strain are more likely to commit deviance or crime than others (Agnew, 1992).

Social Control Theory

It is well understood that the *social control* theoretical tradition (Hirschi, 1969) also builds upon Durkheim's work in explaining deviant criminal behavior (Stockard & O'Brien, 2002). Both traditions argue that weakened attachment is fundamental in generating antisocial behavior. Following Durkheim, Travis Hirschi, in his landmark work *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), argued that the more people are connected to society and other social institutions by social bonds, the less likely they will be to engage in criminal behavior.

According to Hirschi, four types of social bonds keep individuals from antisocial behavior. *Involvement* is the extent of participation in "conventional activities" such as school, work and sports. The more people are involved in these activities, the less time they have for deviant acts. *Commitment* is the investment of time and energy in conventional activities. An increase in commitment is inversely related to criminal or deviant behavior. *Belief* is the idea that the rules, laws, and norms of society should be obeyed. The strength of belief in conformity partially determines whether an individual commits a criminal act. *Attachment* is an enduring, strong, affective relationship between two or more people. This association is characterized by a sense of caring and respect for the opinions and feelings of the other person or group. An inverse relationship exists between attachment and criminality.

Research indicates that of the four types of bonds, attachment is the strongest predictor of criminal behavior (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010; Agnew, 1991; Empey & Stafford, 1991; Jensen & Rojek, 1992; Junger-Tas, 1992). For example, Hirschi (1969) found that attachment, measured as communication between child and caregiver, or attachment measured as affinity to school and peers, was important for control. In family relationships distinguished by a lack of communication, children worry less about their parents' disapproval than in more communicative family units. This indifference increases chances for deviance. Likewise, juveniles who do not like school, their teachers, or peers tend to commit more delinquent acts than other children. Simply put, this research suggests that people are less likely to commit crime if they believe it may jeopardize the affection and respect of those people in their lives who are important to them.

THEORY

In this section we introduce our theory. The theory consists of three logically connected assumptions and a set of scope conditions. Each assumption is supported by relevant theory and research.

Scope Conditions:

(1) All assumptions apply from the perspective of a focal actor designated as 'P.' (2) The interaction occurs in social exchange settings where (3) a focal actor perceives an opportunity to repeatedly exchange with at least one same specific other and where (4) the outcome of the exchange is uncertain. (5) Finally, the focal actor and another are exchanging tangible items such as money or non-tangible, socially valued items such as friendship and esteem.

Assumptions: The theory is expressed through three logically related assumptions that explain how the structural features of exchange generate emotions that lead to the development of deviance under the scope conditions.

Assumption 1: The more communication is impeded between actors 'P' and 'O', the less 'P' will be satisfied with the outcome of interaction with 'O'.

An impediment to communication is anything that blocks, delays, strains, or reduces the frequency of, or interferes with, the interaction. Communication researchers have found that these factors are often associated with lower satisfaction (de Pillis & Furumo, 2007). Researchers comparing virtual to face-to-face interaction (for example in business teams or classrooms) have found that virtual communication is generally equally effective in accomplishing goals, but members of face-to-face interaction report significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the interaction (Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997; Arbaugh, 2000).

Assumption 2: The less 'P' is satisfied with the outcome of interaction with 'O,' the more P experiences alienation from O.

Alienation is defined as emotional detachment or withdrawing personal affection from a social relation. Support for this assumption comes principally from Lawler's (2001) affect theory of social exchange. This approach argues that three fundamental processes occur in exchange settings: (i) the act of exchange generates emotions among participants, (ii) actors attribute these emotions to the exchange relationship itself and (iii) these emotions serve as internal reinforcement contingencies that either increase or reduce group cohesion. Unsuccessful exchange generates negative emotion and a hedonistic or self serving bias that reduces cohesion between exchange partners.

Assumption 3: the more *P* experiences alienation from O, the more *P* is inclined to commit deviance.

Deviance occurs when an actor breaks an accepted normative standard of the setting. Norms include formally enacted rules such as laws and regulations and informal behavioral standards that are not codified into law. Deviance ranges from offenses against rules that are severely sanctioned, such as personal violence against others, to infractions of informal norms that are not officially punished, such as cheating during a casual game of golf.

When actors are detached or withdrawn from social relations, social control theory and research suggests that deviance is likely to occur. Weakened bonds reduce the degree that people care about the thoughts and opinions of others, which increases the probability of normative rule violations. Informal social control by friends, family and neighbors is weakened in these circumstances because the offender is less likely to experience a feeling of shame (Braithwaite, 1989). Consequently, any social characteristic that decreases interdependency among people is likely to increase the probability of deviance (Hamilton & Rauma, 1995).

The theory generates several derivations which are logical consequences of the assumptions of the theory. The following one is of particular interest.

Primary Derivation: The more communication is impeded between *P* and *O*, the more *P* is inclined to commit deviance.

This derivation follows from assumptions 1 and 3 and stems primarily from ideas found in strain theory. This tradition holds that delinquency and deviance occurs when individuals are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). In this context, individuals are unable to achieve satisfaction from interaction. Agnew (1992) extends these ideas by suggesting that negative experiences generate deviant behavior because the failure to achieve positively valued outcomes produces negative emotion which leads to deviant behavior (Kaufman, Rebellon, Thaxton & Agnew, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Social exchange theory, control theory and strain theory each successfully account for responses to emotional reactions generated by social structure. However, the theories take different explanatory routes. Social exchange focuses on responses to exclusion from exchange, control theory directs attention towards emotions generated by alienation and strain theory examines how anomie affects behavior. Integrating elements of each of these theories opens an array of potential new applications without subverting the theory's basic assumptions. Our integrated theory argues that impeded communication disrupts the exchange process, and this in turn leads to deviance that is a result of strain and alienation. Our theory allows for an array of new predictions that have important implications for applied settings, including one of the most important: an increasing number of correctional facilities that have replaced in-person contact visits with virtual visits.

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