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Journal of Criminal Justice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jcrimjus

Reflections on race, personality, and crime

Whitney Threadcraft-Walker^{a,b}, Howard Henderson^{a,*}^a Administration of Justice Department, Texas Southern University, United States^b Earl Carl Institute for Legal & Social Policy, Inc, United States

A B S T R A C T

In this rejoinder we provide notes to consider when reviewing the research on the relationship between race, personality and crime. We concur with DeLisi (2017, this issue) that the equivocal nature of this research demands that there is a need for further inquiry. We also agree with Zuckerman (2002) that there is a distinction between personality disorders and crime but also that crime cannot be used as a proxy for personality disorders. We argue that the research suggests that there are no genetic components of personality disorder and also that this disorder has been found to be equally distributed across racial/ethnic groups. Understanding why there appears to be a racial/ethnic personality disorder disparity within the criminal justice system may be more a function of social class and historical circumstance than genetic composition.

1. Introduction

Antisocial personality and psychopathic personality disorder (psychopathy) are constructs characterized by distinct patterns of interpersonal, behavioral, and affective traits (Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1991; Skeem, Edens, Sanford, & Colwell, 2003). In the most recent iteration of this journal, DeLisi (2017) identifies personality as a significant driver of social interaction, patterns, and behavioral responses (p. 4). From this perspective, he examines the literature that offers personality as a useful construct to explain group differences across antisocial behaviors, primarily crime. DeLisi's review of the existing body of knowledge uses findings from multiple examinations of official victimization data, personality scales, and various longitudinal studies on adolescent health and childhood development. Citing these studies, DeLisi makes two key observations: (1) antisocial and psychopathic personality disorders are disproportionately distributed across racial/ethnic groups and, (2) the disproportionate distribution of personality disorders may be useful in explaining African-American involvement in crime, violent offending specifically.

DeLisi's (2017) use of the racialized differences in the distribution of pathological personality disorders to explain group differences in criminal involvement is not empirically defensible because he a) conflates antisocial behavior, antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathic personality disorder; b) equivocates the aforementioned disorders with criminal involvement; and c) discounts a substantial body of research emphasizing the role of environmental influences on the association between race, personality, and crime. In this article, we identify the primary limitations of the scholarly research utilized by

DeLisi (2017). Notably, we narrow our critique to any research that claims that there are racialized differences in the prevalence of antisocial and psychopathic personality disorder and its utility in explaining African American overrepresentation in violent crime. Our response does not directly address race and self-control, an underlying premise of research examined by DeLisi. However, we maintain that the criticisms outlined below provide notes to consider in the examination of race-based explanations of subjective social constructs.

2. Personality disorders differ

In DeLisi's own words, his review explored the role of personality as a potentially useful construct for understanding racial and ethnic differences in antisocial behavior (p. 2). Despite examining previous research in the areas of personality and antisocial disorder, race and self-control, and race and psychopathy, DeLisi fails to adequately differentiate between antisocial behavior, antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathic personality disorder. First, antisocial behavior more accurately describes a single domain under the more extensive conditions of antisocial personality disorder and psychopathic personality disorder (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2016). In other words, although antisocial behavior is an aspect of both pathological personality disorders, antisocial behavior can be a standalone condition that does not necessitate an APD or psychopathy diagnosis. Furthermore, given the complex nature of APD and psychopathy, DeLisi's reliance on secondary crime statistics merely identifies antisocial behavior in one domain (criminal history). This limited information is insufficient to retroactively diagnose psychopathological disorders among offenders.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: howard.henderson@tsu.edu (H. Henderson).

Moreover, DeLisi fails to contextualize his discussion of antisocial behavior with previous studies that identify the exhibition of antisocial behavior as common among certain populations. Consistently, previous evaluations report that some degree of antisocial behavior is expected during adolescence (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2016; Edens, Skeem, Cruise, & Cauffman, 2001). Baskin-Sommers and her colleagues (2016) report that the majority of youth with conduct disorders do not go on to receive psychopathological personality disorders in adulthood. In fact, Edens et al. (2001) warn that although a substantial proportion of adults with psychopathy likely evinced traits during childhood, it is logically inconsistent to posit that those with non-norm conforming behavior will be diagnosed with psychopathy during adulthood. This position is supported by the Epidemiological Catchment Area Study (ECA) who reported that roughly 75% of their participants with conduct disorders failed to receive antisocial or psychopathic personality disorder diagnoses as adults (Robins, Tipp, & Przybeck, 1991).

Further, despite similarities across multiple domains (e.g., impulsive behavior or remorseless use of others, inconsistent social relationships, etc.), antisocial personality disorder and psychopathic personality disorder are unique presentations, with distinct etiological constructs (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2016; Baskin-Sommers, Baskin, Sommers, & Newman, 2013; Hare, 2003; Hare et al., 1990; Patrick, 1994). In fact, Skeem et al. (2003) offer multiple studies highlighting the distinctions between Antisocial Personality Disorder and psychopathy. Chief among these is the widely cited conceptualization of psychopathy, the PCL-R (Skeem et al., 2003). A two-factor instrument, items in the PCL-R load on one of two distinct scales. The first, categorized by such traits as selfishness, callousness and remorseless use of others, represents a personality based model and typifies the interpersonal and affective core of psychopathy (Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). In contrast, items that load on the second factor indicate a constellation of behaviors that fail to conform to socially prescribed norms, underscoring a chronically unstable and antisocial lifestyle (Hare et al., 1990; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995; Skeem et al., 2003). Items found in Factor 2 are consistent with behavior-based models.

Although the delineation between PCL-R and Antisocial Personality Disorder diagnostic criteria demonstrates some overlap between items in Factor 2 and Antisocial Personality Disorder criteria, the lack of congruency between Factor 1 and APD criteria shows the capacity (or lack thereof) of an instrument intended to diagnose psychopathy to maintain discriminant validity when applied to Antisocial Personality Disorder. This finding is consistent with previous studies that identify psychopathy and APD as distinct constructs, unable to be measured interchangeably by the same instrument.

Differentiation between Antisocial Personality Disorder and Psychopathy is not limited to the PCL-R. For more than two decades, previous studies have called for discrimination between the two disorders for numerous reasons. First, Antisocial Personality Disorder is more prevalent than psychopathy. In fact, among incarcerated populations, 50% to 80% of inmates have characteristics consistent with Antisocial Personality Disorder diagnostic criteria compared to just 15% to 30% of offenders who have traits indicated on psychopathy scales. Second, the former lacks the predictive ability to identify multiple negative outcomes compared with the latter according to PCL-R cutoff scores (Hart & Hare, 1997; Skeem et al., 2003; Widiger & Corbitt, 1997). Additionally, in terms of predicting outcomes such as general criminal recidivism, treatment termination and failure, disciplinary infractions and community violence, psychopathic personality disorder has shown greater accuracy than Antisocial Personality Disorders across psychiatric, correctional, and forensic populations (Edens et al., 2001; Hare, Clark, Grann, & Thornton, 2000; Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991; Hart & Hare, 1997; Hemphill, Templeman, Wong, & Hare, 1998; Monahan et al., 2001; Rice, 1997; Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1996). As such, DeLisi's position that the disproportional distribution of pathological personality disorders demonstrates utility in explaining racialized differences in offending runs counter to longstanding personality-

and behavior- theory and praxis.

3. Equivocates Antisocial and Psychopathic personality disorders with criminal involvement

DeLisi provides an extensive review that highlights the overrepresentation of Black homicidal behavior. Utilizing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, DeLisi cites a study examining disaggregated firearm homicide mortality rates (Heron, 2014, p.3). Though Blacks were overrepresented among deaths from gun violence, this statistic must be taken in context of the overall reality that Blacks are still more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases and unintentional injuries.

Transitioning from disparate victimization rates across race, DeLisi identifies racialized differences in personality. Central to DeLisi's argument is the position that personality functioning is critical for understanding behavior across various domains of life (p.5). In support of this position, DeLisi summarizes previous studies that emphasize personality as a useful approach to distinguish offenders from non-offenders. In support of this evidence, DeLisi attributes criminology's reluctance to explore personality as a potential explanation of criminal behavior to political correctness and a fear of being labeled racist. The veracity of this statement is beyond the scope of this response. However, there is a compelling body of research indicating the relationship between pathological personality disorders and crime is tenuous at best. Hare (1993) remarks that individuals may have characteristics consistent with psychopathy without ever engaging in crime. To this point, Hare (1993) adds that these persons are never incarcerated, function relatively well and even hold occupations as psychiatrists, academics, lawyers and doctors without ever being involved with the criminal justice system. Notably, Hare explains that such persons have all the core personality traits (e.g., egocentricism, callousness, and manipulation) of criminal psychopaths but are protected from justice involvement by such factors as family background and social status (see also Cleckley, 1941).

Clinicians have long been alerted to the presence of non-criminal psychopaths (Cleckley, 1941). Despite this fact, the overwhelming breadth of research examining psychopathic behavior has been conducted on incarcerated populations (Mahmut, Homewood, & Stevenson, 2008). Examining personality disorder in correctional settings has yielded much insight, however subsequent findings may not be generalizable to non-criminal individuals with psychopathic personality disorders.

Though nascent in development, there have been several studies distinguishing noncriminal psychopaths from criminal psychopaths. First, Hall and Benning (2006) postulate that non-criminal psychopaths exhibit less extreme behaviors than their criminal counterparts, and thus are less given to illicit behavior (or less likely to be apprehended). In fact, Mahmut et al. (2008) and his colleagues found that 96% of non-criminal psychopaths had ever had justice involvement in their examination of criminal and non-criminal psychopaths. Moreover, Hall and Benning (2006) argue that personality and antisocial aspects of psychopathy are unique disorders with distinct etiologies. As such, Hall and Benning found evidence that personality features were more common among non-criminal psychopaths, whereas criminal psychopaths tended to display both personality feature and antisocial features (2006).

Further, Farrington (2005) found that among psychopaths, certain risk factors such as inadequate supervision during early childhood, low socioeconomic status, a previously incarcerated parent and a parent of low verbal and non-verbal intelligence had a strong relationship with more acute presentations of psychopathy. Considered in sum, previous research calls for further examination of those external factors that protect non-criminal psychopaths from engaging in criminality (Frick, Bodin, & Barry, 2000; Lilienfeld & Fowler, 2006).

4. Environmental factors, race, personality, and crime

Consistent with his previous work, DeLisi (2017) maintains that prevailing ideologies have steered criminology toward structural and sociological explanations of offending (Wright & DeLisi, 2015), despite the abundance of scholarship supporting the influence of environmental factors on race, personality, and crime (pg. 5). DeLisi discounts an expansive body of research that emphasizes the influence of one's surroundings on the development of pathological personality disorders and violent offending. For instance, Marshall and Cooke (1999) found significant association between adverse family factors, psychopathy and violent offending. Negative home environments are not the only ecological factor indicated in the research, as empirical support has been found for other such factors as poor peer relationships (Freidenfelt & Klinteberg, 2003), school failure (Marshall & Cooke, 1999), and community disadvantage (Haynie, Silver, & Teasdale, 2006; Sommers & Baskin, 1992).

Among these evaluations, community disadvantage has received the most robust support. Encompassing a range of indicators (e.g., the spatial concentration of poverty, female headed households, density of children, social disorder, joblessness, residential segregation and limited political influence), some argue that community disadvantage is an antecedent of violent offending (Haynie et al., 2006; Sommers & Baskin, 1992). Though DeLisi calls attention to the disproportionate distribution of personality disorder across race as an explanation for minority involvement in violent crime, contemporary research identifies disparate distribution of community disadvantage by race as a more plausible explanation for differential involvement in violent crime, particularly among youth (Sampson, 2012; Chauhan & Reppucci, 2009; Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008; Baskin & Sommers 2014, 2015).

Nearly 70% of Black children are raised in disadvantaged communities compared to only 6% of White children (Sharkey, 2009) and 19% of Latino children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). As a result, a greater proportion of Black children risk exposure to the attendant negative outcomes of community disadvantage (e.g., disparate physical and mental health outcomes, diminished academic achievement, family fragmentation) (Baskin & Sommers, 2014, 2015; Chauhan & Reppucci, 2009). The prevalence of Black children living in disadvantaged communities is particularly troubling given research examining the intersection of psychopathology, race, and environmental conditions, specifically exposure to violence. In fact, the effect of direct exposure to community violence on the development of pathological personality disorder is well documented among cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009). Baskin-Sommers et al. (2016) found that early exposure to violence was associated with greater and more enduring negative outcomes such as persistent gaps in academic achievement (Delaney-Black et al., 2002), early displays of aggression (Durant, Pendergrast, & Cadenhead, 1994) and somatic symptoms, like headaches and irregular sleep patterns (Bailey et al., 2005). Additionally, Baskin-Sommers et al. (2016) also found evidence indicating that despite the circular relationship between exposure to violence and subsequent participation in violent offending, exposure to violence was the stronger predictor of violent offending rather than the reverse. With rising rates of socioeconomic inequality, the haves have drifted even further from the have-nots, in terms of income and spatial geography (Ascoli et al. (2011). Disadvantaged minority communities are more likely to live in social isolation. This is particularly troubling considering previous research that identifies concentrated poverty as a significant predictor of violence even after controlling for psychopathy and race (Silver, Mulvey, & Monahan, 1999). Taken together, these findings warrant further consideration of growing evidence of the psychological effects of marginalization on the individual. Ascoli et al. (2011) note that social exclusion and anti-social behavior are likely mutually enforcing. As such, they argue that isolation of marginalized groups from normative aspects of social and economic engagement may actually increase the

risks of Antisocial Personality Disorder and Antisocial Personality Disorder may exacerbate social isolation. In this way, it is essential that future research seek to increase understanding of how environmental factors converge with race and psychopathological disorders.

Though contemporary research highlights the impact of multiple environmental factors, consideration of external influences on the development of pathological disorders is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, support for social factors has been a cornerstone of psychological epistemologies for decades (Ascoli et al., 2011; Foulks, 1996). Even the diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) includes guidelines for cross-cultural diagnosis of personality disorders. More specifically, the manual advises against mechanical applications of diagnoses. Instead, it cautions that deviance must affect functioning of the individual and argues that the categorical approach underscoring the diagnosis be offset with nuance and consideration of contextual factors, specific to the individual (Foulks, 1996). Despite this warning, Ascoli et al. (2011) report that White majority definitions of social deviance, and by extension crime, are systematically applied to individuals from ethnic/cultural minorities. The result has been discrimination at the macro and micro level as it relates to detection, reporting and treatment of non-norm conforming behavior.

Relatedly, Cohen (1972) noted that the identification of deviant behavior(s) may be a function of power and preservation of the prevailing social order. Simply stated, behaviors that threaten the status quo are more likely to be defined as deviant. Young (1990) echoes a similar sentiment in his articulation of cultural imperialism, which he defines as a process by which the values, experiences and culture of the dominant group is understood as the norm, while divergent values, experiences and culture is viewed as inferior, inadequate, or deviant. Ascoli et al.' (2011) position on race, culture, ethnicity and personality appears to synthesize previous research explicating the relationship between race, culture, and psychopathology quite well, "In culturally diverse societies it is important to bear in mind that social construction of these aspects of mental health and behavior is likely to be variable within and well as between social groups" (p.56). Considered together, these studies emphasize the variable nature of deviant behavior across societies, and over time.

5. Conclusion

Overall, research that claims to identify race-based differences in the distribution of pathological personality disorders as a rationale for group differences in criminal involvement is not supported by research examining the nexus of race and psychopathological disorders. In fact, consistently throughout the literature, relationships between these factors are non-significant counter-indicated (Ascoli et al., 2011; Baskin-Sommers et al., 2016; Skeem et al., 2003). The premise of most of this race, personality and crime research is problematic in that it never clearly delineates between antisocial behavior, antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathic personality disorder. Instead, they often use of the terms interchangeably without the differences in their respective diagnostic criteria—inevitably giving pause to any causal link to crime. Additionally, DeLisi falls victim to same errors as most of the research that has somewhat found a relationship between personality disorder, race and crime in that they utilize prior studies to equivocate psychopathological disorders as a proxy for criminal involvement. Further, he fails to account for a substantial body of research emphasizing the role of environmental factors on the association between race, personality, and crime.

In this rejoinder, we have tried to provide a contextualization of the research that examines this personality, race and crime relationship. We maintain that antisocial behavior, antisocial personality disorder, and psychopathology have not only distinct etiologies, but unique relationships with social deviance and crime. Moreover, we argue that the use of psychopathological disorders as a proxy for criminal involvement is insufficient in that it oversimplifies complex psychopathological

diagnostic criteria, across multiple domains of life, to a composite of past convictions and arrests. Lastly, we argue that socially constructed measures of non-norm conforming behavior be responsive to the limitations of cross-cultural identities and their divergent cultural experiences as it pertains to the development of personality constructs.

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