

The Relationship between Social Cognition Evaluations and Crime Experiences: A Comparative Study on Different Types of Offending Behavior

Chien-An Chen

Department of Psychology and Research Centre for Psychological Science, Chung Yuan Christian University

The reason why some offenders only engage in specific pattern of offences but not others remains incompletely answered. There is a lack of social-cognitive perspective theory designated to explain crime choice. The different cognitive beliefs about offending exhibited by offenders were tapped within a multi-manners research framework. Offenders were asked to cross-assess or compare their own and three other crime types (drug abuse, theft, sexual, and violent) in terms of the crime self-identity, normative beliefs, cognitive beliefs, crime episode judgment, and moral domain assignment. The question addressed in this paper concerns the extent to which beliefs and social knowledge about offending characterize the four different characteristic types of offending. Two hundred and ninety adult male prisoners (mean age = 34.0 years) provided self-reported criminal histories. From these a crime specialism index (CSI) indicative of the proportion of offences of each type was calculated for each offender.

Results showed all cognitive variables were entered as predictors, but the number of the variables included in crime regression models varied from one to another. Drug offence CSI was amongst the best crime type to be predicted by the social cognition variables investigated. This may be explained by the fact that drug CSI accounted for 42% of total averaged CSI. The more intensive an offender's involvement in a specific pattern of crime the more likely were they to evaluate this type of crime more positively, legitimately and less moral concerns involved than any of the other crime types concerned. In this way, cognitive representations reinforce an offender's specific pattern of criminal acts while also may insulate them from pressures towards other criminal activities. Evidence is presented that offenders' social knowledge development is consolidated around crime themes corresponding to the predominant crime engaged. It is thus suggested that offenders may socio-cognitively adhere to specific patterns of criminal thinking. To maximize their benefits and maintain the cognitive equilibrium, a self-serving (denying crime consequences and legitimating their own offending) but other-negating thinking inclination emerged in offenders' social knowledge. Therefore, the habitual offending behavior may be the function of reciprocity between crime cognitions and repeated crime engagements. Future research should explore in greater depth the specificity and versatility of social cognitive reasoning in this context. Also, more offenders' idiographic viewpoint regarding the factors which intervene between beliefs about what is good and good behavior need to be understood better.

Keywords: *crime specialism index (CSI), crime types, moral domain assignment, socio-cognitive evaluation*