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Laura Bui · David P. Farrington

Crime in Japan

A Psychological Perspective

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Preface

Almost ten years ago, we took knowledge on crime from a psychological perspective and compared it to our findings from Japan. There were many similarities in psychosocial factors for youth offending and violence. The major difference, however, was a higher level of violence among young Japanese males compared to that among young American males. Albeit with limitations (what research doesn't have its limitations), this finding contrasted with the dominant research literature and stereotypes on Japan: namely that the country had low crime compared to Western industrialised countries, because its citizens were group-oriented and harmonious due to its collectivist culture, its social institutions were benevolent and organised, and its public spaces were spotless and efficient. Counter-narratives that questioned this particular account existed, and so we continued our investigation.

Our research interest in Japan stemmed from narratives in the US on Asian-Americans. This population has lower offending rates than other American racial groups (Yoo et al. 2010). In addition, educational attainment and socio-economic status are comparatively high in this population. Because of these assets, Asian-Americans have been dubbed as 'model minorities'. A cultural explanation was assigned to this

phenomenon: collectivist values such as group harmony, dependence, and high self-control were responsible for the success of this group. Confucian values of strong familial ties were also suggested when referring specifically to Americans of East-Asian ancestry (Ng et al. 2007). In fact, whenever an issue is raised by Asian-American communities, it is questioned because, unfortunately, it is believed that they should have nothing to complain about. The feeling is that they should be glad for their success as a minority group.

If cultural values explained the comparatively low crime rate of Asian-Americans, this should apply to Asian countries as well—lower crime rates should be found among countries of the ‘East’ than in the ‘West’, and these values should play a prominent role. Within the criminological literature, it appeared that the most targeted Asian country on the ‘low crime because of culture’ discourse had been Japan.

Our line of investigation revealed how powerful the narratives of the dominant group were. The model minority myth has been spread to demonstrate that the US is, indeed, a meritocracy and that success is accessible to anyone if only they worked harder (Wu 2014). Likewise, Japan was perceived as a ‘criminal justice utopia’ (Goold 2004) by Western scholars and its institutions were used as global models to aspire towards and replicate. A significant amount of this literature promoted Japan through an uncritical Western gaze. Much of what is understood about crime in Japan in the English language further demonstrates the challenges of creating a universal knowledge base for criminology. Cross-national crime studies are essential.

Cross-national studies of crime are valuable because they are able to establish universals and culture-specific phenomena (Farrington 2015). They are not carried out enough because differences between countries make proper comparisons difficult. Other issues with cross-national studies include methodological challenges, lack of transparency in the publication of crime statistics in less developed countries, and the costliness of conducting such studies.

Liu (2007) observed that these issues are a hindrance to the development of criminology. To overcome them, he argued that case studies should be used; they had unparalleled strengths because they offered in-depth knowledge of one country without the methodological

headaches in comparing two or more countries. They were able to provide a wealth of information about a country's crime and criminal justice, as well as an understanding of its historical and cultural context. In fact, he considered the case study to be the most productive approach in developing comparative criminology, for it had limitless possibilities of investigating criminological topics. A case study should be able to, first, examine and expand on criminological concepts and theories; second, examine crimes particular to that country; and third, investigate how social control and the criminal justice system function.

Our book is a case study on Japan. The main aim is to review research on psychology and crime in Japan, published in the English language, and to compare the results with comparable research from Western industrialised countries. We focus on English language research in order to make Japanese studies accessible to an English language audience. The book takes a different angle in that it offers an understanding of crime from a psychological perspective. Criminology often follows a sociological perspective. Indeed, the majority of criminologists have a background in sociology or were trained as sociologists. Some of these sociologists believe that psychology has no place in criminology and that only societal phenomena explain crime. A more cynical view is that psychology blames the individual for social ills—people are poor, uneducated, offenders, and failures because they choose to be; something is wrong with them, rather than with the social system, that should be fixed. This, however, is a simplistic view of what psychology can contribute to criminological knowledge.

Human behaviour and the individual seem pertinent to emerging criminological phenomena in Japan, and this warrants a psychological approach. Psychological explanations of crime are more useful in understanding individual-level crime phenomena because they emphasise influences from cognition and biology, as well as from social relationships and the immediate environment. This is not to say that crime is the product of only psychological factors. At the same time, sociological factors may manifest as psychological factors to affect people personally; psychology could be seen as an articulation of the effects of sociological phenomena. For example, deprived neighbourhoods, because of social inequality, affect accessibility to nutrients, which in turn may manifest

in individuals as aggressive behaviour, poor executive functioning, and low self-control. Perhaps this contributes to the significant relationship between poverty and violence. We can observe the individual, who may reflect larger social forces that are not readily apparent.

In this book we present what is known about crime and antisocial behaviour in Japan from a psychological perspective, and aim to explain how this fits into the broader understanding of crime. Chapters 2–8 cover known explanations for crime. Including them was based on how pertinent they were to understanding crime in Japan and to psychological criminology. Some chapters, like the one on mental disorders, were more concerned with highlighting the relevance of psychological phenomena rather than being a known explanation for crime in Japan.

Chapter 1 introduces explanations for crime by setting the context. We discuss Japan's influence on the West, and vice versa, and how these influences have affected the study of crime in Japan and comparative criminology. Chapter 2 revisits the cultural explanation for crime. Although cultural traits have not been dismissed entirely by Japanese scholars, the consensus seems to be that culture is an incomplete explanation. Part of the issue has been the implications of using a cultural explanation for certain countries and not for others. A lot of knowledge on cultural differences and similarities has been gathered in the area of cross-cultural psychology, and only recently have criminologists begun to implement this in promising theories.

The chapter after discusses the life course and how it explains offending. Examining crime through developmental phases requires studies that are long-term, known as longitudinal studies. In Japan, however, these studies are difficult to conduct due to government policy. In addition, elderly crime is a recent emerging issue, possibly because of modern societal changes. Chapter 4 delves into family explanations, starting with types of family violence and then family risk factors for later offending. A primary challenge in effectively addressing family violence is societal perceptions of the family and women.

Chapter 5 focuses on young people, as social discourse has blamed them for the perceived societal breakdown and rise in crime. Attention to youth crime is important because of findings from developmental and life course criminology, which suggest that early prevention is

important in stopping the development of persistent, serious offenders. The debate on the use of crime prevention is also explored. School factors are discussed in Chapter 6, and we look into the development of self-control as a personality trait. The rigidity of the educational system has been criticised for contributing to the rise in violence at school, particularly bullying, and at home with school refusal.

Mental disorders are examined in Chapter 7. Special attention is given to the 2005 Medical Treatment and Supervision (MTS) Act, which addressed previous limitations in dealing with offenders who were diagnosed with a mental disorder. Poor mental health, as reflected in significant cases of suicide and social withdrawal, is, too, reviewed. In the penultimate chapter, biosocial interactions are the focus. Very little research has been done directly on the biosocial approach, but studies from the fields of psychology and psychiatry indicate promising future avenues in examining these interactions. Psychopathy and sexual offending are examined within the context of biosocial explanations. Chapter 9 is the concluding chapter, which discusses future needed research to advance knowledge, and to contribute to a universal knowledge base, if it is even possible.

We are aware of our position as Westerners in the UK writing a book about Japan. This is the challenge of international, comparative criminology. Investigations of an unfamiliar terrain are open to all scholars, but care must be taken to depict as accurately as possible the subject of study. Under-representation, however, is a problem in criminology. Scholars who are not versed in the English language, or do not have collaborators who are, find themselves limited in their ability to contribute to collective knowledge on crime and criminal justice, because criminology primarily represents a certain group of scholars—those from the English-speaking Western world. Fortunately, this is changing. Although the growth of criminological knowledge in Asia has been slower than in North America and Europe, there is now more research conducted and made available in and from Asia, enabling a better understanding of crime phenomena than before (Liu 2009).

In addition to contributing to the area of comparative criminology, we would like our book to inspire further discussions on integrating psychological insights into crime and justice research.

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