Cross-National Perspectives on Female Crime: An Empirical Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies three theoretical perspectives on changing patterns of female criminality: a Durkheimian-Modernization perspective; a Marxian-World System perspective and an Ecological-Opportunity perspective (see Neuman and Berger, 1988). It draws convergent and divergent hypotheses from these perspectives and tests them with data from up to 49 nations. The empirical evidence suggests that all three perspectives are useful for understanding cross-national differences in female criminality.

This paper addresses a triply underpursued line of criminological research: female criminality from a cross-national, multi-theoretical perspective. In doing so it, first, contributes to the recent upsurge of research on female criminality. Second, it brings to bear a comparative or cross-national perspective to the test of available theory. Finally, it tests hypotheses derived from three theoretical paradigms, rather than relying on the dominant "Durkheimian-Modernization" paradigm that has informed most cross-national studies of crime (Huggins, 1985; Neuman and Berger, 1989), including studies of female crime (Hartnagel, 1982; Hartnagel and Mizanuddin, 1986).

Theoretical Approaches

Neuman and Berger (1988) have recently suggested that at least three theoretical approaches are available for the explanation of cross-national variations in crime: the Durkheimian-Modernization approach; the Marxian-World System approach; and the Ecological-Opportunity approach. I discuss and clarify each approach by suggesting areas where convergent and divergent

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I would like to thank the Rhode Island College Faculty Research Committee for supporting this research. I also thank Michael Pay and Christine Zannella for their assistance in preparing data for the project.
hypotheses about female criminality may be tested. I then test these hypotheses using available cross-national data.

The Durkheimian-Modernization Perspective as Applied to Female Crime

Neuman and Berger have suggested that most cross-national studies of crime have relied on a Durkheimian or modernization theory of social change, and this would seem a no less apt characterization of cross-national studies focusing on female crime specifically. Generally the Durkheimian-Modernization (DM) approach takes all nations as essentially comparable units, differing only to the extent to which they have incorporated modern values and patterns of life as their own. The diffusion of such beliefs, values and patterns is, of course, a source of normative breakdown and anomie, associated with growing cultural heterogeneity and, importantly, crime.

Presumably, this diffusion of disruptive beliefs and values, accomplished, as Durkheim (1933) suggested, through increases in moral density and urbanism and consequently the division of labor and industrialism (see Krohn, 1978), is what accounts for the greater crime rates in modern, as opposed to traditional, societies. It is also, however, seen by some as the major reason why female crime rates are gradually increasing in modern societies.

This view, of course, presumes that women have, until recently, been denied full exposure to the crime potentiating influences of modernization even in relatively modern societies. The denying agency is most often seen as the traditional female role. Freda Adler takes an almost conspiratorially gleeful tone when she echoes Brutus in describing the sources of a new female criminality in “Sister in Crime”:

There is a tide in the affairs of women as well as men, and in the last decade it has been sweeping over the barriers which have protected male prerogatives and eroding traditional differences which once nicely defined the gender roles. The phenomenon of female criminality is but one wave in this rising tide of female assertiveness ... (1975: 1).

Adler’s implication that female criminal behavior will parallel male criminal behavior as gender roles converge also echoes convergence themes in DM theory, themes that would have national development mean the same things to all nations and peoples (e.g., Peacock, Hoover and Killian, 1988).

What, though, are the specific links between modernization and female crime? Timothy Hartnagel (1982 and along with Muhammed Mizanudden in 1986) has suggested that these links are both direct and indirect. He suggests that modernization (conceptualized as economic output and urbanization) should be directly linked to female crime because of a weakening of traditional social bonds and an undermining of informal mechanisms of social control, but indirectly linked via its effects upon gender role convergence and diminishing gender differentiation. The implicit view that modernization is positively associated with a diminution of gender role differentiation has itself been the subject of considerable debate, with much effort having been expended deter-