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Victimization: Its Impact on Masculinity and Criminal Offending

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Abstract

Male victims are an underrepresented group within society. Prior research has indicated that male victims may feel a diminished sense of their own masculinity. Criminology has identified that masculinity does play a role in some men’s decisions to engage in criminal behavior (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2016). It seems logical that these two concepts would be related. Utilizing self-reported data from 130 college males, the current study analyzes the relationship between childhood victimization, masculinity beliefs, and the decision to engage in criminal/delinquent behavior.

Introduction

Men are being victimized and society is not talking about it. Most frequently, men are portrayed as the perpetrators of crime and not the victims (Newburn & Stokes, 1996). Prior research has found that men who are victimized may feel a diminished sense of their own masculinity. This phenomenon has been identified when looking at different crimes. A study conducted by Wood in 2004 found that men who committed interpersonal violence often felt emasculated at some point by their partner. This emasculation appeared to be a major influence in their decision to engage in interpersonal violence. A more recent study by Heber (2017) found that when interviewed about their histories of victimization, men would often avoid the direct questions and attempt to redirect the questions to focus on their histories of perpetrating violence. This redirection was done in an effort to make themselves appear more masculine.

Criminological research has identified that masculinity does influence some men’s decisions to engage in criminal behavior. Previous work by James Messerschmidt (1993, 2016) has found that when boys or men are unable to “do their gender” through legitimate means, they may engage in criminal behavior as a means of achieving their masculine status. According to Messerschmidt, most boys or men are able to achieve masculine status through education or employment. When those two means are unavailable, then crime becomes a viable option.

It seems logical that these two bodies of literature would be related. Boys are victimized at a young age, then experience a diminished sense of their own masculinity and will then engage in criminal or delinquent behavior as a means of “storing gender.” While previous research certainly has hinted at this phenomenon, to date no studies have attempted to fully link the two bodies of literature. If this phenomenon is true, then it has major implications for society. By failing to provide services to these boys and men soon after their victimization, society may actually be perpetuating the crime issue.

Methodology

The current study utilized an online, self-reporting survey of undergraduate students (n=135). This survey asked participants about their histories of childhood victimization, masculinity beliefs, as well as their histories of perpetrating criminal behavior. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to assess the correlations and relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Limitations

This study was limited in multiple ways by the sample group. One major limitation was the relatively small sample size (n=135). Due to this small sample size, which included even fewer participants who had both engaged in criminal behavior and experienced childhood victimization, analytical power was limited. In addition, the current sample frame omitted boys and men from both the general public as well as those who are currently incarcerated. The inclusion of these two groups may have yielded different findings.

Discussion of the 2015 Findings

The nationally estimated rates of childhood sexual abuse in boys is a rate of 1 in 20 (Finkelhor, et al., 2013). This rate is much lower than the nationally estimated rate for girls, who experience childhood sexual abuse at a rate of 1 in 4. A study conducted by Dr. Alexis Kennedy in 2015, found rates of childhood sexual abuse that were much higher than the nationally estimated rates.

Utilizing a sample group of 775 undergraduate students, the 2015 study found an extremely high rate of childhood sexual abuse in the Las Vegas Valley. Rates of childhood sexual abuse in the female population (n=440) were slightly higher than the national rates at a rate of 1 in 3 girls. When looking specifically at the male population (n=295), the rate of childhood sexual abuse was much higher than the national average at a rate of 1 in 5.

Due to the fact that the majority of the sample was raised in the Las Vegas Valley, it is hypothesized that various characteristics related to Las Vegas are influencing these high rates of childhood sexual abuse. Namely it is hypothesized that the ease of access to alcohol and illicit substances, the overly sexualized environment, and the high rate of shift work are key influencers in this phenomenon.

Discussion of the 2018 Findings

The current study was unable to prove the proposed hypotheses. Bivariate analyses did not indicate a correlation between childhood abuse and diminished masculinity. Similarly, the analyses were unable to prove a correlation between masculinity and the perpetration of criminal behavior. While the proposed hypothesis was unable to be proven, bivariate correlation did show a statistically significant relationship between physical abuse and the perpetration of criminal behavior. A statistically significant relationship was also found between physical and emotional abuse. This indicates that participants who experienced physical abuse had also experienced emotional abuse in their childhood.

Multivariate analysis was unable to provide any evidence for the proposed hypothesis as well. Linear regression did not indicate that masculinity was a predictor for criminal behavior when controlling for various other characteristics.

Overall, the current study was unable to provide evidence of a relationship between childhood abuse, masculinity beliefs, and the decision to engage in criminal behavior. That being said, the current study was able to provide evidence of a relationship between childhood abuse and criminal behavior. This finding should not go ignored, as looking at victimization as an explanation for delinquent behavior could provide important insight into ending the over incarceration of young men.

Future Research

Future research should continue to analyze the relationships between childhood abuse, masculinity beliefs, and the decision to engage in criminal behavior. It is possible that using a larger, more diverse sample group may yield different findings. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches may also provide a more clearer picture of the proposed relationship. In addition, utilizing these methodologies may also provide insight into how different aspects of the participant’s social identity (e.g. self expression, religiosity, etc...) are being influenced by early victimization. Finally, the correlation between physical abuse and the perpetration of criminal behavior should be investigated further.

References