Sex Stereotypes and Responses to Juvenile Delinquency

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On the basis of our current knowledge of sex stereotypes and their influence on judgments about women and men, two conflicting hypotheses about reactions to delinquent behavior by men and women, or by boys and girls, can be put forward. First, because crime is mainly masculine, responsibility for criminal behavior will be more strongly attributed to a boy's nature than to a girl's, thereby leading to more severe punishment for boys. Second, deviations from a stereotype lead to negative evaluations, and thus should lead to harsher punishment for girls. The first study described, based on a field experiment with 709 adolescent and 403 adult subjects, was conducted to determine whether different sanctions were applied to boys and girls who engaged in identical delinquent behavior. The results show that for boys, more severe punishment was preferred for aggressive behavior, and for girls, more punishment for noncriminal delinquent behavior. In a second study (N = 43), it was hypothesized that these differences in sanctioning corresponded with the degree of perceived masculinity of the delinquent behavior. This hypothesis was confirmed. A model shows how sex stereotypes about delinquent behavior lead to sex-related difference in attributions, which in turn lead to differences in punishment.

Crime is mainly a male pastime: Men commit about two to three times as many crimes as women (Edwards, 1973; Wolfgang, 1979). Men also commit more violent crimes, like assault, while a relatively large part of female offenses consists of minor property crimes, such as shoplifting.

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This same trend also occurs in juvenile delinquency. Boys are usually involved in proportionally more of almost all types of offenses, with the exception of running away from home (Canter, 1982). The differences between boys and girls are largest for violent crimes such as fighting and vandalism. Studies based on official records show the same type of differences in delinquent behavior between boys and girls as those found in self-report studies, although the actual percentage vary enormously. Differences in delinquent behavior of boys and girls are rather stable over a period of ten years (Canter, 1982).

Not only are there sex differences in the incidence of criminal behavior, but also both the informal social environment and the formal legal system respond differently to male and female crime. Female criminals who have been arrested are treated more leniently than male criminals. This is known in criminology as the “chivalry effect” (cf. Visher, 1983). Contrary to this, it is reported that women are sometimes treated more harshly, and especially that girls are punished more severely than boys. Girls are more often subjected to institutional reeducation for status offenses, such as running away from home (cf. Teilman & Landry, 1981). These phenomena are often seen as contradictory. The purpose of this paper is to show that the same process, the influence of sex stereotypes on the perception of male and female delinquents, produces these effects, and so to resolve this “unresolved controversy” (Kruttschnitt, 1984).

Stereotypes are cognitive schemata, which consist of expectations about the characteristics of persons who belong to a particular social category; for example, an ethnic group. The expectations concern their personality traits and their behavior. Although stereotypes about specific groups can, and do, vary from person to person, there also are many culturally shared ideas about specific groups. Sex stereotypes, stereotypes concerning men and women, or concerning boys and girls, definitely belong to this class of almost universally shared stereotypes (Williams & Best, 1982). Generally, men are expected to be aggressive, assertive, and dominant, while women are supposed to be submissive, dependent, and caring. Behavioral norms are derived from stereotypes. Men and boys can be headstrong and individualistic; girls should be obedient and behave properly. Consequently, a strong correspondence exists between stereotypic behavior and appropriate behavior (Canter & Meyerowitz, 1984). Considering the stereotypic male traits, such as aggressiveness and strength, delinquent behavior conforms to the masculine stereotype better than to the feminine stereotype.

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2 It should be noted that juvenile delinquent behavior not only comprises crimes that are legally described as such (like theft), but also misbehavior that in many countries is not legally forbidden but is generally considered undesirable for juveniles and is called juvenile delinquency. Examples of this type of misbehavior are truancy and running away from home.