

MEDIA AND TEENAGE DELINQUENCY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ENQUIRY

MIHIR BHOLEY

Associate Senior Faculty, Interdisciplinary Design Studies, National Institute of Design, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rising incidences of teenage delinquency in India in the recent years. It explores the factors contributing to the gradual surge in teenage delinquency in India of late more particularly the impact of explicit and unrestrained media content which technological advances have facilitated. Media and crime is not only an ongoing debate for years, it's a social concern which has not found a convincing answer yet despite several attempts of empirical research by sociologists, psychologists and media researchers. However, since most of the empirical researches are done within the framework of a particular discipline, this paper underscores the need to make an interdisciplinary enquiry to measure the extent and nature of the impact of explicit and unrestrained media content on the delinquent behaviour of the teenagers.

KEYWORDS: Crime, Delinquency, Interdisciplinary, Juvenile, Media, Peer Pressure

INTRODUCTION

Call it an entertainment stereotype, the 'angry youngman' of the popular Indian cinema is a product of the victimisation of innocence at early childhood. He's born innocent, shy and somewhat timid like other children of his age. However, it's the abusive, oppressive and unjust treatment meted out to him by the cruel world at the tender age which makes him the 'angry young man' in later years. This may be an extrapolated 'poetic justice' given to the cinematic narrative, so much so that people often accept such interpretations. However, some psychological studies reveal otherwise. It's found that aggressive delinquent behaviour in most cases develop during childhood itself and not at later age as much. Anderson, Berkowitz et al. (2003) observe that as per research a significant percent of aggressive children are 'likely to grow up to be aggressive adults, and that seriously violent adolescents and adults often were highly aggressive and even violent as children.' In a way, the aggressive behaviour in the adulthood is also a natural extension of the same in the childhood which may have been caused due to variety of factors. Huesmann & Moise (1998) and later Tremblay (2000) have also noted that the most significant interpreter of violent behavior of adolescents and youth is their aggressive behavior during childhood.

Juvenile Delinquency in India

However, aggressive behaviour is just a small fraction of the whole gamut of delinquency which is gripping the Indian teenage population in alarming proportion. Based on a social activist Anil Galgali's RTI data provided by Mumbai Police The Times of India, Mumbai (Feb. 14, 2014) reports the alarming 100 percent increase in juvenile rape cases from 2012-2013. While the occurrence of juvenile rape was 11 in 2012, it rose to a staggering 28 reported cases during the first 10 months of 2013. There was also a 100 percent increase in the molestation cases and sexual harassment rose from 1 to 10 during the same period. However, maximum cases of reported juvenile crime were of hurt, grievous hurt and theft. Mumbai alone experienced an overall 15% rise in registered juvenile crimes during 2012 and the first 10 months of 2013. In 2012 there were 700 registered cases against children, but during January – October 2013 it rose to 802. The 2012

Nirbhaya case of Delhi not only brought the rising grievous crime against women including rape and murder to the national limelight most vociferously, but also shook nation's sensibility by highlighting the involvement of a teenager in the crime. Shockingly, the teenager was not only an accomplice in the heinous crime but also the cruellest perpetrator too.

As per India's National Crime Bureau data, in 2011 the total number of cognizable crime was 2325575 out of which 25125 or 1.1 percent was juvenile crime. In 2010 the major juvenile crimes recorded (under various Sections of Indian Penal Code) included theft (4930), hurt (3800), burglary (2271), riot (1081), rape (858) and murder (679). The percentage of crime committed by the children (men and women under 18 years of age) may not be staggering as compared to those committed by the adults. But more than the gradual rise in the number of juvenile crime, it's the nature of crime which is a matter of serious concern. What is even more outrageous is that while during 2011 relatively minor crimes viz. theft, hurt and burglary rose by 7.9 percent, 7.8 percent and 14.9 percent respectively; it was major crimes namely rape, murder and riot which increased by a shocking 33.9, 30.8 and 24.6 percent respectively. The terrifying occurrences of rape against which there's such a huge outrage building up in India has seen exponential rise in terms of juvenile involvement. From 399 in 2001 the juvenile involvement in the crime of rape has increased to 1149 in 2011 which is nearly three times in a decade.

The overall increase in crime globally and deteriorating law and order situation in general are giving rise to the negative sentiments against juvenile offenders. Different nations have different punitive provisions for juvenile delinquency ranging from life imprisonment (as in different states in the US) to a maximum of 36 months sentence in remand home even for committing the act of murder (as in Nirbhaya's case 2012). The Indian Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 ensures that the juvenile gets a different treatment from the ordinary adult criminal. The juvenile justice system ensures that the perpetrators of crime up to the age of 18 is not imprisoned but is subjected to advice/admonition, counselling, community service, payment of a fine. The maximum punishment will amount to being sent to remand home for three years. India being the signatory of the UN Convention on the Right of Child 1989 is under obligation to U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985) (also referred to as "Beijing Rules") and the U.N. Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (1990) has to treat juvenile crimes differently from those committed by the adults. The legal rationale behind this is the belief that juveniles are neither physically nor emotionally (mentally) matured enough to take responsibility of the crime they have committed. Since, their character and personality is yet to fully develop instead of harsh punishment including confinement to jail, rehabilitation is a better option.

UNICEF in one of its reports on juvenile offending in the three Caribbean nations Barbados, Dominica and St. Lucia suggests that: 'juvenile justice ought not to simply cover the treatment of children in conflict with the law but should also include efforts to address the root causes of offending behaviour and implement measures to prevent such behaviour. There should additionally be a desire to reintegrate these children into society and allow them to play a constructive role.' (Views on Juvenile Offending in Barbados, Dominica, St. Lucia: August – November, 2010).

The report identifies some universal and some local factors such as 'peer pressure, materialism, lack of parental control, unemployment, drug abuse and the absence of (positive) role models' among the main reasons which have given rise to the involvement of the juvenile in the most serious offences committed. It throughout rates peer pressure as the cause for drug-related offences besides rioting and violence. For the cases of stealing and theft it holds the rising materialistic approach responsible. The report also talks about the responsibility of various institutions from government to

family, private institutions, NGOs, media in combating this problem. It's in this context that the role of media has also been underscored since the report expects media to play a balancing act by presenting information, education and entertainment without sensationalizing them and make them play a more meaningful role. It talks about media entities making useful relationships with all of the other agencies so that there could be greater facilitation of outreach efforts between other agencies and the youth giving them a chance to be seen as both current and future assets in society.

Factors Contributing to Delinquency

For a long time host of psychological and sociological theories have tried to explain delinquency from different perspectives. A human being is both a biological creature and a social animal. In other words: a biological creature which creates a society and lives in it. The conflict between the biological design and social determinism is perennial. Human behavior, both normal and delinquent are conditioned by the psychological and social factors including various methods of rewards and punishments. These methods help in social control as well as in modulation of behavior. Emotions may be a part of the inner self but their display happens on the social sphere. As such deviant and delinquent behavior become subject of sociological and psychological analysis and interpretation at the same time. It will be important to understand delinquent behavior in the theoretical frameworks too.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Anomie and Strain Theory

During the 1930s many social theorists tried to explain delinquency in the context of Durkheim's theory of anomie which referred to a collapse of social norms or the separation of a man from the prevalent forms of moral order and further to a condition conducive to higher rates of suicide. However, the conceptual interpretation didn't remain confined to the deviant behaviour of suicide alone. It was advanced by successive theorists namely: Robert Merton, Richard Cloward, Lloyd Ohlin, and Albert Cohen in much wider context. They present a positivist/objectivist perspective of delinquency and consider behavior as an observable phenomena. Akers, Seller (2009) explain: "Anomie is the form that societal malintegration takes when there is a dissociation between valued cultural ends and legitimate societal means to those ends." Cloward & Ohlin (1960); Cohen (1955) et al. look at delinquency as a result of either social class or family differences. Merton (1938) advanced the Strain theory further and underscored the incongruity between the goals society set and the methods adopted to attain the goals. Merton believed that those who want to attain societal goals but do not have the means to attain are under strain which leads to delinquency. The sociological theories hold delinquent behavior an outcome of social interaction rather than heredity or personality disorder. Thus, stress that to understand this phenomena time, place, audience, and nature of the behavior must be studied.

Social Bond Theory

Often called "Social Control Theory", it refers to deterrence or the lack of it as the central idea. In other words, social control theory does not question why people commit deviant act rather tries to understand why people conform to conventional norms. As Bartollas and Dinitz (1989: 205) and Farrall (2005) put it, instead of asking "Why do people do it" the social bond theorists ask "why don't they do it?" To find the answer, one needs to look into the social bonds which creates a social and emotional connect of an individual with his family, friends, society, community and other groups and institutions. Strong interpersonal attachment and involvement with each other work as deterrent to several crime. Besides, commitment of individuals to traditional belief and practices and institutions such as religion, faith etc. often strengthen the belief in conventional morality, ethics and work as mechanism of social control. However, gradual weakening of most of

these institutions of informal social control can also be considered the potent factor for the proportionate rise in delinquent acts in recent years. Therefore, the rising incidences of criminal delinquency among the Indian teenagers can also be evaluated in the context of the weakening of the institutions of social control and other factors viz. urbanization, modern lifestyle, assertion for individual space and freedom.

Cultural Transmission and Differential Association

Deviance and conformity according to this theory arise out of similar process which is socialization. So, a child brought up in the company of deviants or criminals is more likely to adopt similar behavior by internalizing their norms. Edwin Sutherland's concept of differential association further reiterates that people learn both conformity and deviance from groups or people they associate with (Sutherland and Cressey, 1978). The most influencing learning comes from the most intimate group. The intimacy and frequency of association are other determinants of behavior, both good and bad. The role of media in cultural transmission is most profound in the era of digital revolution. Media is among one of the most influencing peers in whose association teenagers learn many things. Digital technology has made transmission of diverse and far flung culture so simple. Though from the media perspective it remains debatable what kind of 'cultural transmission' it facilitates.

Conflict Theory

Marx believed that law and other social institutions are tools of oppression of the marginalized. The concept was adopted by the conflict theorists. They point out the social apathy to the fact that laws are inherently prejudicial to the interest of the marginalized. They also believe that laws are not administered justly and often favour the powerful over the deprived. The reason why there're more deviant people from the marginalized class finds a justification in this theory. To an extent it applies to the Nirbhaya and several other cases of late where the juvenile – the main perpetrator of the crime, belonged to the same social strata. Nevertheless, not all from among the deprived take up to crime. Perpetrating crime also requires a psychological conditioning and preparation. Hence, the psychological interpretations also require serious consideration.

Psychological Theories

If delinquency is an abnormal human behaviour, its intimate association with mind cannot be ruled out. Personality disturbances, low emotional quotient, lack of remorse and intelligence were considered some of the causes of delinquent behaviour by early psychological theories. These theories did not even rule out the role of biological factors in determining intelligence. It's in this context that Freud's personality constituents: *id*, *ego*, *superego* becomes relevant. *Id* being instinctive is not governed by reasons. *Ego* as human personality, controls *id* while *superego* helps make rational decisions. The conscience and morals of a man is said to be guided by the *ego* and *superego* which remain in contact with the environment. *Id* evolves with time. Thus, from the Freudian perspective deviance could be an outcome of irrepressible *id*, defective *ego*, or an immature *superego* or their combination. Consequently, delinquent act may be considered a result of personality disturbance. The psychoanalytic method suggested by Freud which talks about *introspection* and *retrospection* to analyse the mind remains a valid method till date. Alexander & Healy (1935) write that criminal tendency cannot be understood by discovering certain incriminating thing by statistical method nor by making inferences from the results of individual method. They emphasise the understanding of psychological processes that work in the background of human mind.

The paradigmatic shift from the Freudian theory was visible by mid-20th century and the new theorists looked at delinquent behaviour as a learned and acquired behaviour. The new behaviourist theory suggested a departure from the Freudian introspection and retrospection method to a more empirical one based on observation and behaviour measurement. Behaviourist Skinner regards social behaviour of man as a bunch of learned responses to definite stimuli. He considers delinquent behaviours as varieties of human social behaviour, acquired in the same way other social behaviours are. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning which talks about a certain type of learning in which future behaviour is determined by the consequences of past behaviour gives anew insight to understand delinquent behaviour.

BIOLOGICAL THEORY

Born Criminal

The biological theory of delinquency was initially based on the assumption that criminality is inherited or has a genetic connection. Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) one of the founding fathers of criminology gave the 'born criminal' theory based on his belief that the criminals are throwback of primitive beings. There is a kind of imprint of Darwinian evolutionary theory (from lesser to higher creature) in Lombroso's assumption. Besides, phrenology (study of skull shape) and physiognomy (study of facial features) also figured prominently in his theory which tried to relate the acts and traits of delinquency to physical features. Nevertheless, the role of social factors later figured in his assumptions. He tried to find a more scientific and empirical basis of deviant behavior which even today is not completely ruled out.

A natural extension of biological theory was to find and establish the genetic and hereditary link between an individual and his delinquent behavior. However, despite conducting behavioral studies on children adopted in childhood and having least contact with parents it was not fully established whether the deviant traits of the adopted child was hereditary or due to their environmental factors. Jones and Jones (2000) observe that close behavior traits of the twins under their observation could have been more due to do the communicable nature of antisocial behaviour than heredity. The recent development of biosocial criminology, Fishbein (1998) and others argue against the hereditary nature of criminality but accept the existence of biochemical preparedness in the brain which under influence of a conducive environment was capable of triggering deviant behavior. Biogenetics (BG) does further probe in this area. Turkheimer (2000) identifies 'Three Laws of Behavioral Genetics' and aptly explains them in the following words:

"First, all human behavioral traits are heritable. Second, the effect of being raised in the same family is smaller than the effect of genes. Third, a substantial portion of the variation in complex human behavioral traits is not accounted for by the effects of genes or family (reared, non-shared environment)."

In the 21st century genetic engineering has expanded the horizons and created new possibilities of doing more accurate scientific study of the link between hereditary and delinquency. The possibility of creating human genetic blueprint may help in the identification of the genetic deficiencies which may cause delinquency and find the remedy.

Media and Delinquency

Liberal media policy and loosening control over media content in the name of creative freedom on the one hand and the 24x7 format of dissemination on the other have changed the socio-cultural landscape considerably. In the absence of self-regulation unrestrained media content having heavy doses of crime, violence and sexual intimacy are easily accessible to all including teenagers. They are considered one of the major influencers of delinquent behavior among teenagers. Anderson et al. (2003) observe that: "Recent large-scale longitudinal studies provide converging evidence

linking frequent exposure to violent media in childhood with aggression later in life, including physical assaults and spouse abuse.” Besides, they also suggest that since extremely violent criminal behaviours such as rape, aggravated assault, homicide are sporadic, there is a need to carry out fresh longitudinal studies with larger samples so that habitual childhood exposure to violent media content and its impact on their behaviour could be accurately estimated.

The whole debate whether or not unrestrained and explicit media content is responsible for delinquent behaviour is fraught with contradictory arguments and findings. The social science and behavioural science present different perspectives of the same phenomenon as they try to look at it from different angles. For example, some studies concentrate on the impact of media violence on aggressive thinking. This includes besides other things the beliefs and attitudes considered responsible for aggressive behaviour. Besides, studies are also conducted to ascertain how media violence influences aggressive emotions visible in thought and emotions. However, delinquent behaviour – violent and of other kind are rarely influenced by a single factor. There’re multiple socio-economic and psychological factors which often converge and contribute to such behavior. So the mass media defenders are disinclined to accept and own up the entire responsibility. To substantiate several arguments are put forth such as a teenager arguing that despite remaining obsessed with violent video games for years he has never killed anyone. However, despite being absolutely true the argument sounds like a middle aged person arguing he has not developed cirrhosis of liver even as he has been drinking for years. The two examples do not rule out the probable threat that both carry due to their exposure to risky behaviour.

Media and the Portrayal of Crime

Surette (2009) writes that around late 1880 the popular media industry was divided into distinct marketing genres which included western, romantic novels, detective mysteries, crime thrillers and so on. The nineteenth century media dominated by print and the twentieth century by audio-visual electronic media capable of delivering strong visual images portrayed crime and justice in the same manner. Crime and violence which dominated the American and a large part of western media soon travelled across continents. Today the fixation with crime and sexually explicit visual images constitute the large chunk of media content even in India. Crime, violence and sex have a coercive yet clandestine appeal. And as Surette (2009: 240) observes they’re “private, secretive and hidden, surreptitiously committed and studiously concealed” such depictions are capable of titillating and sensationalizing young minds. The depiction of rare and bizarre acts not seen so often in day-to-day life offer an opportunity to experience the surreal. The depiction of sin and retribution in media often seems somewhat glorifying or overstating the earlier while the latter seems just incidental.

Cyber Media and Delinquency

A major chunk of media content today is generated by cyber media. A large variety of sexually explicit content are available online depicting from hidden camera MMS to brutal acts of sex, incest video, paedophilia and so on. The increasing reach of internet in developing nations including India is making access to sexually explicit content much easier. McKinsey (2012) report on the Internet’s Impact on India estimates India’s internet user base to be 120 million which is the third largest in the world. By 2015 it’s going to be the second largest internet user nation with 370 million users. The downward trend in the cost of internet access and mobile devices are the prime factors behind the boom. The report states “In an evolution pattern unique to India, users who access the Internet only through a mobile or tablet device will constitute around 75 percent of new users and 55 percent of the aggregate user base in 2015.” It means more and more teenage users will have easy access to high speed internet and websites including those having sexually explicit

content. The harmful impact of web content is engaging thinking minds world over often leading to regulation versus self-regulation debate.

The easy access and wider reach of internet makes an ideal situation for inappropriate exposure especially to the young and teen age population. Pornography alone is a huge industry under cyber-media which is estimated to be an over \$100 billion industry. The revenue generated are in excess of the total revenue earned by the top technology companies combined: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, Netflix and Earth Link 2. According to Pendyala and Sinha (2010) there're 42 million pornographic websites which is 12% of the total websites. There're 420 million pornographic pages on the Internet out of which 89% have origin in the US. Besides, the daily pornographic search engine requests are 68 million which constitutes 25% of search engine requests. And most interestingly 42.7% Internet users view pornography. Of course, a large chunk of this comprises of the teenagers.

The fantasy the virtual world of cyber media creates can suck the audience into a kind of surrogate reality. Sharp and Earle (2003) observe that:

'The internet makes possible the existence of 'virtual communities' of deviants; cyber world characterised by sub- or countercultures, in which discreditable practices are accepted as the norm and are entirely without stigma, and in which one may participate without threat to one's 'normal identity'. (p. 39)

The question is not whether such explicit contents of sex and violence influence minds and particularly the impressionable minds. Because unless they influence why people watch such content? The real question is are such exposures through media responsible for juvenile criminal behavior? If yes, to what extent? Media being the link between the content and the audience remains largely value neutral when it comes to communication. Besides, it's also argued that apart from sex and violence media generates far more informative, entertaining and socially meaningful content too. Therefore, it's not to be entirely blamed for all the occurrences of crime. There's a genuine fear that regular dose or overdose of the images of violence, crime and sex at an inappropriate age enhance the risk of turning fantasy into reality. The empirical research by Seto *et al.* (2001) and Carter *et al.* (1987) to ascertain the impact of adult pornographic material have given contradictory results. Seto's result tends to discount it while Carter's study confirms that in a particular case exposure of pornographic content had clearly influenced two groups of criminals –convicted rapists and child molesters. Of the two, the child molesters had exposed themselves with such content before and during committing the offense.

CONCLUSIONS

Stan Cohen's seminal work of the 1970s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, is considered to have initiated the debate "whether the mass media distort reality and create unjust stereotypes, whether the mass media engender moral panics and whether the pernicious overlap between 'real' crime and fictional crime effects viewers" (Soothill 1998). There's no doubt that depiction of all sorts of crime are often overrated and exaggerated. But we do not have credible data to ascertain what quantum and nature of violence, crime or explicit content may trigger the criminal behavior. Theories of criminology are enormously framed in sociological perspective and rightly so. However, they subsume assumptions of human desires, developmental vulnerabilities, and social interpretations. However, Monahan and Splane (1980) argue that "sociological concepts and theories rest on models of human psychology, models that are often implicit and unexamined and sometimes obsolete." Crime and deviance may be a socially constructed category but an effective enquiry may require intervention of

psychological science as well which essentially seeks to discover the devices and processes which produce behavior so that they be explained as such generalized abstraction which may apply to everyone.

Therefore, to study the media impact on delinquent behavior while it's important to understand the present state of the value systems, cultural tolerance and acceptability towards such exposures and depictions in media; it's also important to observe how they influence behavior and induce the psychological impulse which manifests in conflict with the established norms of social behavior. Media often has to face criticism, wrath and even sanctions in many places due to its apparent value neutrality. It'll be difficult to empirically prove to what extent its unrestrained and explicit contents of crime, sex and violence are responsible for delinquent behavior unless the enquiry is made through an interdisciplinary approach in which this sociological phenomena is analyzed from the psychological perspective. It may help shape the media policy in different nations including India.

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