

Can Sex Differences in Meta-Awareness of Emotions Explain Incarceration Differences?

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Abstract

Men have a 1 in 11 chance of going to prison sometime during their lives, whereas the chance for women is 1 in 91 (Bonczar & Beck, 1997). Unlike race and social class, gender differences in imprisonment have only recently been examined (Chambliss 1972; Crew, 1991). General strain theory might partially explain these gender differences. It argues that criminal violence increases when individuals cannot relieve their strained negative emotional experiences (Agnew, 1992). If individuals cannot reflect upon and manage their emotions, they should experience more emotional strain. Perhaps men are more violent because these abilities – called meta-awareness of emotions (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995) – are lower than in women.

This study compares men and women in terms of meta-awareness of emotions. Previous research has sometimes found men pay less attention to their emotions (Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, & Johnsen, 2003, but see Fernandez, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004), but has not yet shown reduced ability to repair emotions. We hypothesize men will score lower than women on all aspects of meta-awareness of emotions.

A total of 217 undergraduates completed the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995), which contains three subscales: Attention, Clarity, and Repair. Men scored significantly lower on Attention, but differences on Clarity and Repair were non-significant.

Men's low scores on Attention reinforce previous research showing men tend to use avoidance-focused coping whereas women tend to use emotion-focused coping (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). However, men report they can repair their emotions as well as women do. Perhaps the key difference is the strategies they use. Women are more likely to express their emotions (Howerton & Gundy, 2006), whereas men are more likely to relieve emotion strain using aggression or substance abuse (Rosenfield, 1999). Future research should examine the specific coping mechanisms that men and women use to relieve negative strain.

Introduction

Meta-awareness of emotions is defined as an individual's ability to reflect upon and manage the individual's own emotions (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Meta-awareness of emotions can be divided into three sub-constructs: the clarity with which an individual describes their feelings; the degree of attention that they give to these feelings; and their ability to repair negative moods and retain positive moods (Salovey et al., 1995).

Researchers have been examining the meta-awareness of emotions in criminals in order to understand criminality from a psychological or emotional perspective (e.g., Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001; Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008). For example, previous research found that psychopathic male inmates were less likely to pay attention to emotions, and they were also less capable of repairing negative emotions and retaining positive emotions, compared to non-psychopathic men (Malterer et al., 2008). These results might be explained by general strain theory, which states that when an individual experiences a strained emotional experience (especially anger, anxiety, and resentment), the individual's violent crimes increase (Agnew, 1992).

Men are more likely to go to prison than women (Koons, Burrow, Morash, & Bynum, 1997). General strain theory might explain these sex differences if there are also sex differences in meta-awareness of emotions. However, little research has been conducted on factors that might explain the sex differences in incarceration rates (Crew, 1991; Chambliss 1972). Some research has found that men pay more attention to emotions (Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, & Johnsen, 2003), consistent with general strain theory and the higher incarceration rates. However, other research has found no significant difference between men and women (Fernandez, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004). The current research is designed to further examine sex differences in meta-awareness of emotions. Based on the findings from Thayer et al. (2003) and Malterer et al. (2008), we hypothesize that men will score significantly lower on all aspects of the meta-awareness of emotions.

Method

Participants

A total of 217 participants (149 female and 68 male) from a psychology subject pool completed this study in return for course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 49 ($M = 22.62$ years, $SD = 6.23$). The majority of participants were Caucasian (58.5%), followed by Asian (15.2%), Black (10.1%), Hispanic (9.2%), Native (.5%), and other (6.5%).

Measures

Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995)

The Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS) has three subscales: Clarity (the tendency to attend to one's emotions), Attention (the ability to identify those emotions clearly), and Repair (the ability to sustain positive moods and repair negative moods). It contains 30 items: 13 for Attention, 11 for Clarity, and 6 for Repair. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Thus, the composite scores can range from 30 to 150. Internal consistencies are high: Attention ($\alpha = .86$), Clarity ($\alpha = .88$), and Repair ($\alpha = .82$; Salovey et al., 1995).

Procedures

The TMMS was completed as part of a larger study that was completed online. The study had two parts, each of which took about 90 minutes.

Results

Men scored significantly lower on the Attention scale than women. Men also scored lower on the Repair scale, but the differences were non-significant. Finally, men scored higher on the Clarity scale, but the differences were also non-significant (see Table 1.)

Table 1 Means (Standard Deviations) for Men and Women

Branch	Men	Women	t-test
Attention	3.73 (.47)	3.89 (.47)	$t(215) = -2.35, p = .020$
Clarity	3.69 (.58)	3.63 (.65)	$t(215) = 0.73, p = .469$
Repair	3.53 (.71)	3.60 (.73)	$t(215) = -0.61, p = .544$

Discussion

General strain theory suggests that violence is more likely when an individual does not pay attention to their emotions and is unable to repair their negative moods. We hypothesized that differences in these two aspects of meta-awareness of emotion might explain differences in incarceration rates between men and women. This study replicated previous research (Thayer et al., 2003) showing that men pay significantly less attention to emotions than women. However, we found no sex difference in repair. Thus, this study does not support the claim that general strain theory can explain why men tend to go to prison more than women. This negative result should be interpreted with two limitations in mind. First, the TMMS is a self-report instrument (Salovey et al., 1995). Men claim that they are as good as women at repairing their emotions, but they may be over-estimating their abilities. Second, we did not measure delinquency or criminal behavior of our participants. It could be that general strain theory can explain differences in the incarceration rates for violent crimes but not non-violent crimes, for example. Future research should examine meta-awareness of emotions for men and women who have been convicted of the same crimes, for both violent and non-violent crimes.

Given that general strain theory cannot explain sex differences in criminal behaviors, what can explain these differences? Previous research has shown that men and women use different strategies to repair their emotions. Consistent with the current finding that women pay more attention to their emotions, previous research has found that women tend to use emotion-focused coping whereas men tend to use avoidance-focused coping (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). Emotion-focused coping is a strategy where people focus on their emotions and thus manage the distress that they experience (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Pearlin & Schooler). It can include crying, asking for advice, and talking about one's emotions (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). In contrast, avoidance-focused coping is a strategy where people deny that the distress is real (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Pearlin & Schooler). The individual may watch TV, exercise, or talk to friends about things that are unrelated to the problem that is making them upset. Men who use avoidance-focused coping are likely to deal with negative emotions via antisocial behavior or substance abuse (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Rosenfield, 1999). Men may avoid emotion-focused coping because men's gender socialization experiences shape their self-concepts as men (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). They may feel that the benefits of asking for emotional support and advice do not outweigh the negative social label of being feminine (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). Future research should examine the efficacy of each specific coping strategy that men and women use to relieve negative emotion. Perhaps men are incarcerated more frequently because they are more likely to choose ineffective strategies (which fail to relieve their negative emotions) and strategies that involve criminal behaviors.

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