

The representation of crime in the media

Forensic psychology has a lot to offer journalism and the kind of narrative that has traditionally contained accounts of crime can be significantly improved by using a broader contextual and developmental narrative.

Crime narratives have evolved over time into a relatively fixed framework. The account gives the reader a clear sense of who did what when – often alluding to underlying anxieties about impunity, injustice, lack of safety and absurdity. What is missing from these accounts is a real attempt at answering the “why?” question. Why did this crime happen at this time? What are the underlying socio-economic bio-psychosocial processes?

By reporting simply on the immediate circumstances of the crime, the opportunity to provide the public with a broader context which adds to their understanding of the offence and offending generally is missed.

This can have the effect of locating the responsibility for what has happened solely with the individual involved, as opposed to what is most often the case where there is a cascade of accidents and injustices that antedate and significantly impact on the culminating act.

Serious offenders are almost invariably people who have been through an unspeakably grotesque developmental process – characterised often by repeated experiences of rejection or abandonment, physical, emotional, sexual and neglecting abuse. It is not unusual to find that serious offenders have been taken in to care and abused in that context – particularly historically before the more recent improvements in the care system.

To present, then, a narrative about ‘a crime’ is to tell half a story.

The sense of accumulation of injustices and the resulting psychological damage and social alienation deriving from this remains obscured. Indeed it is not part of the public perception or understanding to think about or recognise these cascades of adverse experiences as a common eventuality in this day and age.

Typically people think about ‘abuse’ as being discrete singular episodes and the victims of this as being perhaps ‘unlucky’. It is hard then for the public to recognise that poverty and early adversity can entail this kind of multiple trauma that inevitably results in serious emotional and social problems in those who experience them. Recent evidence increasingly highlights the substantial role that this kind of trauma plays in the development of mental health problems, such as depression and psychosis, as well as in the development of crime.

Whilst it is critical from a journalist’s perspective to provide a succinct account of ‘what happened’ in the public interest – what ‘it’ is and how the domain around an event is defined is inevitably a choice about what it is in the public interest to know. To limit the frame around what is observed to the current moment is to assume that it isn’t in the public interest to represent the back-story of accumulating atrocities that created the

ground for the processes driving the offence to occur. If the public were more able to conceive of the currently often unconceivable stories of adversity and abuse in the lives of many serious offenders, then greater and more sophisticated attention could be paid to the most effective strategies for intervening – whatever political persuasion they have.

The public also need to have a more elaborated understanding of human nature, that is capable of recognising that choices to offend are situated within life-stories that make them 'rational' and meaningful as opposed to being acts of bizarre or meaningless hostility, made by people who are in some way at a fundamental level different from 'you or I'. Without this kind of understanding, it is easier perhaps for people not to see people who offend as being human and easier to then enter in to a consciously or unthinkingly vengeful response. It also can foster a sense of human nature being for some irrational and crassly self-interested which contributes to an overarching sense of wariness and anxiety in relation to fellow humanity.

A developmental approach allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which people can be shaped by their experiences of adversity. This also allows audiences to develop a more elaborated sense of what kinds of interventions are likely to impact on those who have offended. Interventions predicated on the idea of punishment can inadvertently play into a pattern of responding to people who have offended by being cruel to them in ways that often parallel what happened to them as they were growing up that lead them into offending in the first place.

Examples of trauma related psychological processes that can be triggered and exacerbated by the experience of imprisonment include: becoming emotionally cut off and numb (a common coping response to trauma), being anti-authority (because those who abused you were representatives of authority), futurelessness (living in the here and now because the future offers nothing) and seeking revenge (often against people that remind you of the people who abused you).

Both Journalism and forensic psychology can be enriched by the active exploration and discussion of the representation of people who offend and offending generally in the media. Public opinion, in order to be adequately informed about the up to date understanding of offending, needs to be engaged with a process of active dissemination of this important information and the debates that fall out of them.



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