RESEARCH

Rational Choice and Its Limits: Bounded Rationality in Minor Offending Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Criminal behavior is explained by rational choice theory as the result of intentional decisions made by people after weighing perceived costs and benefits. On the other hand, bounded rationality argues that situational and psychological elements like peer pressure, emotional states, and time constraints impact decision-making. This study looks at how college students' decisions to commit low-level crimes like theft, vandalism, and drug-related offenses are influenced by bounded rationality. Due to their frequent exposure to emotionally charged environments and social pressures, college students represent a relevant population.

An anonymous survey of undergraduate students will be used in the proposed study to assess their self-reported minor offenses, peer influence experiences, risk perceptions, and emotional decision-making tendencies. The association between offending behavior and bounded rationality factors will be evaluated through statistical analysis. This study will further our knowledge of deterrence and rational choice theory in criminology by demonstrating how situational and cognitive factors influence criminal decision-making. The findings might inform better preventative tactics and campus regulations meant to lower minor offenses committed by young adults.

INTRODUCTION

Criminal behavior is often explained in criminology using rational choice theory, which argues that individuals make intentional decisions after weighing perceived costs and benefits (Becker, 1968). In this framework, offending is often viewed as a deliberate act where individuals consider punishments, social impacts, and personal gain before acting. Rational choice theory has strongly influenced modern policies by assuming that increasing the certainty and severity of punishments will prevent people from committing crime. However, this assumption relies on the idea that individuals use deliberate reasoning before committing crimes, an assumption that does not always reflect real decision-making.

In practice, decision-making is often restricted by cognitive limitations, limited access to information, emotional states, and time pressures. Bounded rationality suggests that individuals do not always make fully informed or calculated choices (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996). Instead of calculating risks and rewards,

people frequently use heuristics, social cues, and emotionally charged judgments. Research has shown that perceptions of risk and punishment are not always stable or rationally formed (Nagin, 2013; Pogarsky, 2002).

These findings question the idea that offenders consistently behave as perfect decision makers. Instead, criminal decisions may be shaped by one's environment and may limit rational thinking. College campuses are a relevant setting for examining these constraints. Minor offenses such as vandalism, drug possession, theft, and alcohol-related violations often take place in social environments influenced by peer pressure and heightened emotions.

Young adults are especially sensitive to peer approval and short-term rewards, which can amplify risk-taking tendencies (Steinberg, 2008). In these situations immediate social benefits of deviant behavior may outweigh abstract or delayed consequences. While rational choice theory states that students would carefully weigh the punishments of their actions before offending, bounded rationality suggests that these decisions may be influenced by impulsivity and social pressure. Despite the influence of rational choice theory in criminology, there has been less focus on how bounded rationality influences minor offending among college students.

Most deterrence research focuses on serious crime or repeat offenders, leaving misconduct in collegiate environments underexplored. This gap is important because campus disciplinary systems often rely on rational deterrence assumptions when designing punishments and prevention strategies. If student decision-making is constrained by cognitive and social factors, policies based only on rational choice may be less effective. The purpose of this paper is to examine how bounded rationality influences college students’ decisions to commit low-level crimes.

Using an anonymous survey of undergraduate students, this study will assess self-reported minor offenses, peer influence, perceptions of risk, and emotional decision-making. By analyzing the relationship between these bounded rationality factors and offending behavior, this research aims to clarify the explanatory limits of traditional rational choice theory. This paper will first review the foundations of rational choice and bounded rationality, then examine empirical research on college offending, followed by a discussion of the proposed methodology and implications for deterrence theory and campus policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Criminological theories have heavily relied on rational choice theory to describe why individuals exemplify offending behaviors, assuming that people deliberately calculate the perceived costs and benefits before committing criminal acts. Under this framework, policies focusing on deterrence assume that increasing certainty and the severity of punishments will increase the costs of committing crime, effectively deterring people from committing criminal acts. However, research scholars argue that this assumes everyone is a perfect decision maker, while in reality, objective reasoning rarely exists in reality. Instead, many argue that decision-making is heavily influenced by bounded rationality, the concept that accounts for cognitive limitations, social pressures, time constraints and environmental factors that can impose restrictions on a person's ability to make fully informed choices.

Instead of calculating costs and benefits, individuals mainly rely on heuristics and situational cues (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996). The shift in theoretical claims is particularly relevant when analyzing the behavior of college students, who often face social and emotionally complex environments. One of the most important variables affecting rational decision-making among young adults is peer influence. Traditional deterrence models typically fail to account for social pressures and rewards that peers or pupils provide.

Young adults typically possess heightened cognitive sensitivity to approval from others, which often increases the chance of risk-taking behaviors that dominate the restraining effects of future consequences (Steinberg, 2008). This biological predisposition is further amplified by the social dynamics and environment of college campuses. The link between perceived risk and actual behaviors is often weakened within individuals who engage in highly social and peer-driven situations (Apel, 2013). Consequently, when college students are surrounded by their peers, the social benefits of minor criminal deviance, like making friends and fitting in, often outweigh the rational fear of legal and university sanctions.

Prior research has demonstrated that an individual's perception of risk is rarely entirely rational and rarely stable, similar to the impacts of social environments on decision making. While classical approaches to crime assume that there is a blanket understanding of punishment (Becker, 1968), modern criminological findings challenge this idea. Nagin (2013) and Pogarsky (2002) both find that perceptions of formal punishments differ significantly based on the prior experiences of avoiding detection and the immediate context. Apel (2013) finds that people are strictly imperfectly aware of the actual punishments allowed under the law, relying solely on situational aspects to calculate the chance of apprehension.

In a collegiate environment, where minor crimes like underage consumption of illegal substances and vandalism are extremely common, students may subconsciously lower the risk of offending because they commonly see the peers offending without facing sanctions. In addition to social and cognitive constraints, emotional stress plays a crucial role in bounded rationality. Rational choice theory fails to adequately explain impulsive offending because it fails to consider the impact of situational emotions. However, Nofziger and Kurtko (2016) explain that emotions play an active role in hijacking decision making processes.

Their findings on collegiate offending reflects how negative emotional states, like frustration and anger, encourage students to engage in deviant, risky and retaliatory behaviors by immensely reducing focus on perceived consequences. In addition, emotionally charged environments, like clubs and college parties, create time pressures and heightened arousal that force people to abandon calculated reasoning in exchange for positive emotional feelings. As a result, committing low-level campus crimes is often a response to situational triggers rather than calculated rational choice. Despite the clear limitation of rational choice theory reflected in bounded rationality research, there is a distinct lack of focus on how cognitive and situational constraints impact minor offending, specifically among college students.

Most modern deterrence research specifically targets severe crimes and repeat offenders, leaving understanding of low-level misconduct among college students immensely underexplored. This gap in research is highly important to designing effective university disciplinary systems that effectively implement prevention strategies and punishments without basing correctional policies on flawed assumptions of rational deterrence. If student decision-making is actually dictated by impulsive emotional stressors, unstable perceptions of risk and peer pressures, then policies focused solely on rational choice will continue to be

ineffective in correcting deviance.

By utilizing anonymous surveys to assess the correlation between bounded rationality factors with self-reported campus crimes, this study aims to clarify and expand understanding of the explanatory limitations of traditional criminological frameworks and provide actionable insights to better campus prevention strategies and policies.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

This study will use a quantitative survey to examine the influence of bounded rationality on college students' decisions to engage in low-level criminal behavior. The objective of the survey is to collect self-reported data on minor offenses, social influence, emotional decision making and perceptions of risk. A survey method is ideal for this research because it allows for anonymous reporting of illicit behaviors while also providing insight into the relationship between these self reported variables. This approach supports the research question, which aims to determine how cognitive and environmental factors influence deviant behavior among college students.

Data will be collected using an anonymous online survey that will be sent to undergraduate students. The survey will be created using an online platform such as Google Forms. Participants will be asked questions to measure their experiences with peer pressure, heightened emotional states when making decisions, perceived chances of punishment and whether they partake in the use of substances, vandalism, or theft. Most questions will use the Likert-scale to gauge perceptions and attitudes toward specific topics.

This survey will also include multiple-choice questions asking about self-reported behaviors. The survey will remain open for an extended period of time, and participants will take the survey voluntarily. The use of a survey is justified due to the ability to examine the decision making processes and perceptions of the participants, which cannot be directly observed. Surveys allow participants to report their own experiences and thoughts in a structured way.

Additionally, an anonymous survey increases honesty when self-reporting offending behavior. Since the study looks to find a relationship between bounded rationality factors and offending behavior, a survey can provide quantifiable data that can be analyzed statistically. The population for this study is undergraduate college students. The sample will consist of approximately 100 participants recruited via convenience sampling.

Participants may be recruited through class announcements, peer communications and social media posts that target collegiate students. Convenience sampling is appropriate for this study as it focuses solely on college students and aims to gather responses efficiently. Participation will be voluntary, and no identifiable information will be collected. Data analysis will use both descriptive and comparative statistical techniques.

First, descriptive statistics will summarize responses, including the frequency of self-reported crimes and the average scores of peer influence, emotional decision-making and risk perception. The results will be used to identify patterns that link bounded rationality as a factor in low-level offending. Ethical considerations will be addressed throughout the entirety of the study. Participation will be completely voluntary and participants will be informed that they can terminate participation at any time without penalty.

The survey will be anonymous and no identifiable information such as names, emails or IP addresses will be collected or analyzed. This process will ensure confidentiality and reduce risk to participants when self reporting sensitive behavior. The survey will also minimize and avoid questions that could cause mental distress. The purpose of the study will be explained before participants begin, and participants will provide informed consent prior to the survey.

The potential benefit of this study is improved understanding of what influences student decision-making, which can aid in the development of campus prevention strategies.

LIMITATIONS

This study has multiple limitations that should be disclosed when interpreting the findings. First, because the study relies on a quantitative survey, it might not capture in depth and complex reasons for why college students engage in low-level crimes. The proposed method is extremely useful for identifying how variables such as peer influence, emotional decision-making, perceived risks, and self reported offending correlate, but it cannot explain how situational nuances and personal meanings shape those behaviors. As a result, the study could show statistical relevance and correlation, without providing in depth context about why students make certain decisions in specific moments.

This is extremely important, given that this study revolves around bounded rationality, which focuses on impulsivity, social influence and situational factors that may be difficult to capture in survey responses alone. A second limitation would be the use of self-reported data. Due to participants self reports on sensitive behaviors like substance abuse, theft and vandalism, some participants may exaggerate or manipulate responses. Even though the survey is anonymous and designed to allow for honesty when answering, self-report research is still dependent on the honesty of participants.

Some students may minimize or omit conduct that the feel is embarrassing or risky to admit, while others may interpret questions differently depending on life experience. This raises possible concerns related to validity, since reported behavior may not perfectly reflect actual behavior. In addition, perception of risk, social influence and emotional decision making are all subjective and meanings can vary between participants. Another limitation is the sampling strategy being used.

The proposed sample consists of approximately 100 undergraduate students, gathered through convenience sampling, including class announcements, peer communication and social media outreach. Because the sample is not randomly selected, it may not represent the entire undergraduate population. Students who choose to participate in the survey may differ from those who do not, especially if they are unwilling to discuss sensitive topics about deviant behavior. This creates the possibility for selection bias.

The sample may also lack diversity on factors like age, background and social class. For that reason, the study's findings may not be generalizable to all college students. The limited sampling size could also be a possible constraint. While a sample of approximately 100 students is generally sufficient for descriptive and comparative analysis, it is relatively small for drawing broad conclusions on student offending.

A small sample could reduce the strength of statistical comparisons, while also making it more difficult to identify subtle patterns. For example, the study may not be able to provide insight towards the difference

across subgroups or determine whether certain bounded rationality elements are stronger influences than others. This means the studies results should be interpreted as explanatory and not definitive. Finally, the study is limited due to its cross-sectional design.

The survey will capture responses at a single moment rather than following a student throughout the entirety of their collegiate experience. Because of this, the study can only identify associations between bounded rationality actors and offending, but it cannot prove causation. For example, if social influence is associated with higher levels of offending, the survey cannot prove that social pressures directly caused the behavior. Since decision-making can change over periods of time and across different situations, a survey may not fully reflect the unstable nature of bounded rationality that the study focuses on.

Overall these limitations do not make the study invalid, but they do alter how its findings should be comprehended. This study can provide insight into how peer influence, emotional states, and perceived risks relate to low level offending. However, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, with an understanding that the results could be shaped by self-report bias, limited ability to be generalized, and sample constraints. Even with these limitations, the study remains valid and important as a first step in examining how bounded rationality can explain the limits of rational choice theories assumptions in the collegiate environment.

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