The Psychological Triggering Mechanism of Impulsive Hostile Crimes-to Build Theory Based on Emotion-Recognisation-Behavior Chain

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Abstract: Impulsive hostile crime is a severe social issue, whose psychological triggering mechanism still lacks systematically theoretical explanation. This paper is based on the chain of emotion, cognition and behavior, and connect them with a line relation as Emotion-Cognition-Behavior chain, to build the modeling theory used for explaining the psychological process of this category of crimes. This modeling theory blends "the General Agrresion Model" and "Adjustable Interpretation of Emotions", pointing out that strong negative emotions can induce impulsive hostile behavior by influencing cognitive evaluation and behavioral decision-making in specific contexts. Research has found that the interaction between emotional stimuli (such as anger) and cognitive biases is an important cause of sudden impulsive aggressive behavior. This study deepens the understanding of the psychological mechanism of hostile crimes, providing theoretical basis for prevention and intervention of sudden hostile crimes.

KeyWords: Sudden Hostile Crimes; Psychological Triggering Mechanism; Emotion-Cognition-Behavior Chain; General Agrresion Model; Adjustable Interpretation of Emotions

1. Introduction

The impulsive hostile crimes is a hostile act which is triggered by immediate situational cues(such as provocation, threat or pressure) and driven by strong emotions, without obvious premeditation or long-term planning[1][2][3]. Such an act is usually closely related to offernder's emotional regulation defect and insufficient cognitive control and may be influenced by neurobiological factors[4]. Sudden hostile crimes are on the rise globally and have become a serious public health issue. According to a report by the World Health Organization[5], hostile behavior causes over one million deaths worldwide each year, a significant portion of which are sudden hostile crimes. This type of crime not only directly threatens individual life safety but also imposes a huge burden on the social healthcare system and economic resources. For instance, analysis research from Corso reported that, over billions of dollars are wasted by hostile crime damages in healthcare and social productivity[6]. From the perspective of society, hostile crime has the crucial power to the victims, perpetrators, which has spilled over to their families and the surrounding residents. This phenomenon has been researched as, victims probably would go through a long-term psychological trauma, causing them PTSD, depression and anxiety[7]. Furthermore, hostile criminals always have the relatively higher possibility to act crimes again, which arise risks in both social security and justice system[8]. Therefore, an in-depth investigation into the causes and mechanisms of impulsive hostile crimes, with the aim of preventing and reducing individual acts of impulsive aggressive behavior, can contribute to the development of targeted psychological interventions and rehabilitation programs, thereby mitigating the long-term harm such behaviors pose to both society and individuals.

2. The Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Impulsive Hostile Crime

2.1 Emotional Triggers: From Static to Dynamic Perspectives

Impulsive hostile behavior is often rooted in intense negative emotions such as anger, fear, or frustration. According to Gross's process model of emotion regulation, emotional regulation can be categorized into antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies[9]. The former includes situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and

cognitive reappraisal, while the latter primarily involves expressive suppression [9]. Empirical studies have demonstrated that maladaptive regulation strategies-such as emotional suppression and rumination-are strongly associated with anger and aggressive behaviors, whereas cognitive reappraisal significantly reduces aggressive impulses[10]. Individuals engaging in hostile acts often do so as a means of regulating negative affect, with this emotion-regulatory motive mediating the link between affect and aggression[1].

Early studies, such as that by Megargee, conceptualized impulsive hostile crime as a form of impulsive aggressive behavior enacted suddenly and without premeditation, driven by overwhelming emotional arousal[2]. While this conceptualization highlighted the immediacy and emotionality of such acts, it lacked a clear differentiation between impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior and other forms of impulsivity-related crimes. Building upon this, Toch emphasized the role of situational stressors, observing that impulsive hostile offenders typically undergo a brief but intense loss of emotional control, resulting in hostile behavior[11]. This view brought valuable insights into the contextual dependency of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior.

Subsequent research offered more refined models. Bushman and Anderson, through the General Aggression Model (GAM), proposed that impulsive hostile crime often results from immediate situational cues (e.g., provocation or threat), characterized by low deliberation and the absence of long-term goals[1]. This theoretical model has received robust empirical support. For instance, Finkel et al. demonstrated through experimental studies that individuals prone to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior display heightened emotional reactivity coupled with impaired cognitive control, reinforcing the centrality of emotional dysregulation in such behavior[3].

Neuroscientific research has corroborated the pivotal role of emotional regulation in impulsive aggressive behavior. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have shown that exposure to anger-inducing stimuli significantly activates the amygdala; if unregulated, this can trigger hostile impulses. Conversely, effective cognitive reappraisal strategies activate the prefrontal cortex, which in turn downregulates amygdala activity and reduces the likelihood of aggression[12].

Cross-cultural studies have also shed light on how cultural contexts modulate the relationship between emotional regulation and aggression. In East Asian cultures, for instance, moderate emotional suppression is often interpreted as a sign of emotional maturity and shows a weaker correlation with aggression[13].

More recently, both domestic and international scholarship has emphasized the "dynamic process" of emotional regulation, introducing constructs such as emotion dysregulation and emotional granularity[14][15]. Emotional granularity refers to an individual's capacity to distinguish and articulate discrete emotional states with precision. Initially proposed by Barrett in her work on emotion classification and affective experience, emotional granularity has become a central concept in affective science[16]. Individuals with high emotional granularity are able to differentiate and label emotional experiences with specificity (e.g., distinguishing anger from sadness, anxiety, or frustration), whereas those with low granularity tend to use vague descriptors such as "feeling bad." This distinction reflects not only differences in the sophistication of emotional experience but also in emotional regulatory competence.

Several empirical studies have validated these theoretical claims. For instance, emotional regulation difficulties have been found that they are significantly associated with hostile behaviors among adolescents, particularly in managing anger and anxiety[17].

Emotional granularity also appears to influence impulsive hostile crime by shaping cognitive appraisal processes. Individuals with high granularity are better equipped to accurately interpret emotional cues and assess situational triggers, thereby reducing hostile attribution biases. Van Kleef et al., for example, found that high-granularity individuals tend to offer neutral or non-hostile interpretations of ambiguous situations, which in turn reduces aggressive responses[18]. Conversely, those with low emotional granularity are more prone to interpreting neutral or ambiguous cues as hostile threats, thus increasing the likelihood of hostile outbursts. Eckhardt and Cohen similarly reported that low-granularity individuals are more susceptible to hostile attribution bias in ambiguous contexts, which heightens their risk of engaging in impulsive impulsive aggressive

behavior [19].

Furthermore, emotional granularity may be neurobiologically linked to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior. Research indicates that granularity is closely associated with prefrontal cortical functioning-a brain region central to emotion regulation and impulse control. For instance, Barrett and Satpute found that individuals with high emotional granularity exhibited significantly greater activation in the prefrontal cortex when performing tasks requiring emotional regulation [20]. This neurobiological difference may help explain why high-granularity individuals are better able to inhibit impulsive behaviors, while those with low granularity are more susceptible to acting out hostilely when emotionally aroused.

In summary, the transition from a static to a dynamic understanding of emotional processes has significantly enriched the conceptualization of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior. The multifaceted and nuanced mechanisms by which emotions are generated and regulated contribute to a more concrete and empirically grounded understanding of the emotional antecedents of hostile behavior.

2.2 The Role of Cognition: From Isolated Biases to Integrated Cognitive Networks

Individuals' cognitive mechanism is an essential factor that will lead to impulsive, hostile behavior. Specifically, cognitive biases, executive control capacities, and cognitive appraisal processes play critical roles in shaping the likelihood of such behaviors. According to the General Aggression Model (GAM) that developed by Bushman and Anderson, cognitive processes are central in understanding the emergence of impulsive hostile crime [1]. The model posits that aggressive behavior results from an interaction between situational cues, individual traits, and cognitive appraisal mechanisms. Such behaviors occur when individuals are confronted with situations where perceived provocation or threat could occur, and they interpret these cues through a cognitive appraisal process that informs whether an aggressive response will be enacted. This process involves perception, interpretation, and response selection. Deficits in cognitive bias regulation and cognitive control significantly increase the risk of impulsive, hostile reactions.

A key factor in this process is executive function, particularly impulse inhibition, cognitive flexibility, and planning-functions that determine whether an individual will act hostilely in emotionally charged situations [21]. Research indicates that deficits in executive functioning predict increased aggression in both adolescents and adults, primarily through elevated impulsivity [22]. Within this domain, working memory is especially vital. Strong working memory capacity supports empathy in conflict situations and reduces aggressive tendencies [23]. Cognitive training programs-such as self-control exercises and cognitive behavioral therapy-have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing executive function and substantially reducing the frequency and intensity of aggressive behaviors [24].

Cognitive biases have been extensively investigated with a focus on the close link with impulsive hostile crime. One of the most well-documented is the Hostile Attribution Bias, in which individuals interpret ambiguous or neutral social cues as intentionally hostile. For instance, Dodge and Pettit argue that individuals who demonstrate a higher level of hostile attribution bias are more likely to catastrophize unintentional actions as threats and uncertainty, thus leading to the possibility of aggressive behavior[25]. This bias is an initial part of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior, where individuals make first assessments of situations. Perverted perception of the context is the origin of the hostile confrontation. Similarly, Crick and Dodge demonstrated a strong association between hostile attribution bias and aggression in children and adolescents, with the bias serving as a mediating mechanism, particularly in contexts involving social exclusion [26,27].

Chinese scholarship has further advanced this line of inquiry by exploring how relative deprivation amplifies cognitive biases and their link to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior. For example, Ning Xu et al. proposed that the dual-pathway model of relative deprivation needs being constructed, and suggested that the deprivation influences hostile tendencies both through emotional pathways (e.g., anger and frustration) and cognitive pathways (e.g., social comparison and attribution bias), thus intensifying the risk of hostile behavior [28].

Deficits in cognitive control-defined as the ability to regulate impulses, manage emotions, and make rational decisions-constitute another crucial cognitive mechanism underlying impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior.

Research shows that impulsive hostile offenders often exhibit impaired cognitive control, making them less capable of inhibiting aggressive behavior when emotionally aroused. Giancola et al., for example, found that alcohol consumption significantly impairs cognitive control, thereby increasing the likelihood of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior [29]. Raine further identified functional abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex-an area of the brain integral to emotion regulation and impulse suppression-among individuals prone to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior, providing neurobiological support for the role of cognitive control in such behavior[30].

In addition, cognitive appraisal determines how individuals would react toward potential threats. Based on Folkman's theory of stress appraisal, individuals undergo a two-stage evaluation process: primary appraisal (assessing the threat level of a situation) and secondary appraisal (evaluating one's ability to cope) [31]. Impulsive, hostile offenders often overestimate the threat during primary appraisal while underestimating their coping abilities during secondary appraisal, leading to emotional dysregulation and aggressive behavior. For example, Finkel et al. found that individuals display higher level of impulsive hostile behavior tend to distort the intent of others and are uncertain about their capability for peaceful conflict resolution, thus increasing the likelihood of hostile reactions [3]. These distorted appraisals contribute to the adoption of aggression as a coping strategy in stressful encounters.

In sum, the cognitive underpinnings of impulsive hostile crime can be understood through the interrelated processes of cognitive bias, cognitive control, and cognitive appraisal. Hostile attribution and appraisal biases precipitate the situation where individuals will perceive non-threatening situations as ambiguous and uncertain. At the same time, the inability to control their cognitive impulses hinders their ability to inhibit aggressive impulses. Together, these two factors create a cognitive environment conducive to impulsive, hostile behaviour. Understanding these cognitive mechanisms not only enhances theoretical insight into hostile crime but also provides actionable targets for psychological intervention and prevention.

2.3 Impulsive Hostile Crime: From Emotional Impulses to Cognitive Dysfunctions and the Evolution of Behavioral Patterns

Research on impulsive hostile crime benefits from an integrated framework that encompasses emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of its complex mechanisms. According to Berkowitz's Cognitive-Neoassociation Model, negative emotional states-such as anger, fear, or frustration-activate associative networks related to aggression, thereby increasing the likelihood of hostile behavior[33]. This model emphasizes the central role of emotion in impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior, suggesting that emotion not only acts as a trigger but also indirectly facilitates aggressive behavior by impairing cognitive processes. Specifically, when individuals experience intense negative affect, their cognitive resources may become consumed by emotional arousal, diminishing their capacity for rational thought and self-control, which increases the propensity for impulsive aggression.

In fact, impulsive hostile crime can be conceptualized as a dynamic interaction between emotional and cognitive systems, forming an evolving "stress-emotion-cognition-behavior" chain [34]. Individuals initially undergo a strong emotional reaction, followed by a cognitive appraisal that determines whether the emotion escalates into aggressive intent [32]. Cognitive processes such as hostile attribution bias and selective attention reinforce negative emotional states and provide a perceived justification for hostile behavior [25].

Neuroscientific research has further elucidated the mechanisms by which the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the amygdala co-regulate behavior. While the PFC is responsible for rational evaluation and impulse inhibition, the amygdala governs emotional reactivity. Dysfunction in the connectivity between these two regions has been strongly associated with increased risk of hostile behavior[33]. Structural imaging studies have shown that individuals who engage in repeated acts of impulsive aggressive behavior often exhibit reduced gray matter volume in the prefrontal cortex and abnormalities in the amygdala. These structural deficits reinforce emotional-cognitive imbalances, further entrenching aggressive behavioral tendencies [30].

Further empirical evidence supports this view.

Finkel et al. demonstrated through experimental research that individuals prone to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior tend to exhibit heightened emotional reactivity and diminished emotion regulation capacity[3]. Specifically, these individuals are more likely to experience intense anger in response to provocation or stress, and less able to engage in effective regulatory strategies such as cognitive reappraisal or attentional shifting. This deficit in emotion regulation predisposes them to adopt impulsive aggressive behavior as a coping strategy. Similarly, Denson et al. found that impairments in emotion regulation are closely linked to PFC dysfunction. Their study showed that individuals with a history of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior exhibit significantly lower activation in the PFC during tasks requiring emotional regulation, reinforcing the critical role of regulatory deficits in impulsive hostile behavior [35].

The influence of emotional arousal extends to its disruptive impact on cognitive functioning. According to the General Aggression Model, emotion alters cognitive appraisal processes, thereby increasing the likelihood of aggression[36]. For example, when experiencing anger, individuals are more prone to interpret neutral or ambiguous cues as hostile, thereby escalating the risk of aggression. This emotionally-driven cognitive bias is particularly prominent in impulsive hostile crime. Research by Eckhardt and Cohen revealed that individuals with high trait anger are more likely to exhibit hostile attribution bias when interpreting ambiguous situations, thus increasing the risk of hostile responses [19].

Emotional arousal also impairs attention and information processing, as described by Easterbrook's Cue Utilization Theory [37]. Intense emotional states narrow an individual's attentional focus, directing it toward emotion-congruent stimuli while neglecting other relevant information. In the context of impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior, this attentional narrowing is particularly pronounced. For instance, Eckhardt and Cohen found that individuals high in anger are more likely to fixate on perceived threatening cues and ignore neutral or positive information, increasing the likelihood of misinterpreting situations and responding hostilely [19]. Beersma et al. similarly observed that emotional states influence how individuals interpret situational cues; anger, in particular, promotes hostile attributions and elevates the incidence of aggressive behavior [38].

The disruptive effects of emotion also extend to the cognitive appraisal process. According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory of stress appraisal, individuals engage in both primary appraisal (assessing the threat level of a situation) and secondary appraisal (evaluating their coping resources) [39]. Negative emotional states can distort this process by amplifying threat perceptions and diminishing perceived coping ability. For example, Finkel et al. found that individuals prone to impulsive impulsive aggressive behavior, when influenced by anger, tend to overestimate the hostile intent of provocateurs and underestimate their own ability to resolve conflicts nonhostilely[3]. This emotion-driven appraisal bias makes it more likely that individuals will choose aggression as a coping strategy in high-stress situations.

The ultimate impact of emotion on cognition is evident in its interference with behavioral decision-making. For instance, Denson et al. demonstrated that anger significantly impairs cognitive control functions, making it harder for individuals to inhibit impulsive behaviors, thereby increasing the risk of impulsive hostile crime [35].

Recent advances in neuroscience have provided further evidence for the emotional-cognitive-behavioral chain. International research has identified functional imbalances between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala as critical neurological underpinnings of hostile behavior[40]. Additionally, dysregulations in neuroendocrine systems-such as alterations in cortisol and testosterone levels-can influence emotion regulation and cognitive control, thereby indirectly contributing to aggression [41]. In the west, psychological service generally starts from the help of those in need, but in China, this process model may need to be modified. In view of people's negative help seeking psychology, helping activities mostly start from the active behavior of the helper. This does not mean that the provider of psychological services arbitrarily provides help without analysis, but that it inspires those in need to express their needs through inquiry, so as to understand such needs and provide help. The service mode of waiting for door-to-door help may delay many really necessary psychological services in China[42]. Whether people recognize

that they have psychological problems, and whether they need to go to the community for help after recognizing them, and under the premise that the element of community belonging is uncertain, the activities can only start from teenagers.

This evolving emotional–cognitive–behavioral chain-ranging from emotional impulsivity to cognitive dysfunction and ultimately to aggressive behavioral patterns-illustrates the dynamic interplay between affect, cognition, and action [43]. For example, emotional impulses such as anger or frustration may impair cognitive processes like attention and attribution, which in turn shape maladaptive behavioral responses such as aggression. Over time, repeated behavioral patterns can reinforce both emotional dysregulation and cognitive distortions, forming a self-reinforcing vicious cycle [44].

Importantly, recent research has drawn attention to the role of emotional granularity in disrupting this cycle. Kashdan et al. emphasize that the ability to distinguish nuanced emotional states can improve emotion regulation, cognitive appraisal, and behavioral control [45]. Barrett, Chester and DeWall, and Denson have all highlighted the importance of biological mechanisms underpinning emotional self-regulation [46,47][35]. Their findings suggest that individuals with high emotional granularity are better equipped to interpret emotional signals accurately, make more adaptive cognitive appraisals, and inhibit impulsive actions. These insights have inspired more targeted interventions aimed at disrupting the affect–cognition–behavior chain at multiple levels-emotional, cognitive, and neurobiological-offering new avenues for preventing impulsive hostile crime.

3. Conclusion

This study employs qualitative research methods, integrating recent findings from both domestic and international scholarship, to systematically examine the psychological triggering mechanisms underlying impulsive hostile crime. Building upon this analysis, it aims to develop a theoretical model grounded in the "Emotion–Cognition–Behavior chain." This model is expected to offer a novel theoretical perspective for research in criminal psychology, while also providing a scientifically informed foundation for the development of effective strategies in crime prevention and psychological intervention. However, there are something which are needed to be considered carefully, such as how to determine the relationship or the truth of conduction between the emotion and cognition, so that scholars are able to find out which factor is more influential in the system above. Furthermore, as researchers have already found numerous categories of behaviors, it is also quite crucial to logically infer from behavior to cognition and emotions, especially in situations where it's not just one-on-one. And then there is a last but important object to define, the chain above is not a single straight linear development chain, each role has varying degrees of impact on the other two while it occurs or encounter them. Therefore, the above chain is only the author's personal idea of the logical backbone of the entire development process.

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