

— Between crime prediction and crime prevention

Transcription of the interview with Adrian Raine¹ - Ch. 5

5. Prediction and prevention

As we have greater capability of predicting in the future, using big data, putting data sets together, medical data from early on. I think in the not too distant future, we'll have a lot information on people.

And I think that a point will come where we'll be able to take an adult and say, well this individual has not yet committed a serious violent offence but putting all our, our data together we think in the next two years he's got a 50% chance of committing a serious violent act. Imagine if we could make that prediction.

What do we do with that person? and a lot of people would say, well until somebody has done anything wrong you cannot do anything. It would be morally wrong. Yet, you know civil liberties you know? But the counterpoint is that we have the knowledge. We have the knowledge of a 50% chance of them committing a violent act and if we do nothing and they go and kill someone, we have blood on our hands. We've got the blood of that innocent victim, that we could have saved if only we had acted. So when I think of this scenario in my mind, what if we can predict in the future?

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I think one of the questions that comes up is, how accurate is the prediction? Because we know no prediction will be perfectly accurate, you know, what if it's 80%? Or what if it's 70% or 60, I mean I don't know. I don't know where we draw the line between acting and not acting.

As soon as you talk about biological or brain data everyone gets worried about that. Now I think we can talk about that and there's a lot of reasons why people get worried but just in the mean ... before we go into that, we make, we have to make decisions every day about what prisoners to release early because they're not at risk and which prisoners to keep in more because they are dangerous and right now in the United States, often there's no formal assessment. It's up to the judge. What, what is he using ... what's the basis for his judgement? So, I think that what would be better in society is to have much more formal risk assessments of offenders and I think it does occur in some states, at some level, in the United States. But could it be formalised and structured a lot more?

“Some people don't like the idea of making these predictions but let's think about it. If biological and neuroscience data could help us make better predictions, more accurate predictions, than we are doing now, what's wrong in that?”

I suppose one thing we can consider is a form of detention which is not as punitive as prison. What exactly, what shape that will take I think is open to question.

But meanwhile?

Not yet. It's not yet but I mean I think you saw some recent data that we had on cognitive functioning in, in young offenders and showing that cognitive function declines during the time you're in prison, so that's not good news because poor cognitive functioning is already a risk factor for crime.

Would it be worthwhile to put financial resources for improving our prisons?

If we can do that then we can translate that into lives saved, money saved and then the public could be persuaded. I think what we need to do is have an experimental study that has a different option to prison and then show, compared to our control group, we can reduce recidivism, because I think the sceptics will say, show us the evidence. Show us the evidence that this will save us money, not just talk but evidence. Well that's something that scientists could help do in the future.

In your research, you focused on violent crimes. What about white collar crimes?

We do feel differently about white collar crime. We think it's not as serious as violent offending. We've done very little on that. We've only done two studies on white collar crime, one is published, the other is under review right now. So part of the studies really ... it's brain imaging work and our prior study had shown that white collar offenders have actually increased volume of grey matter in the frontal cortex. They have better executive functions which is a neuropsychological term, reflecting better functioning of the frontal cortex.

Now what we make of that, I don't know.

Obviously white collar crime is a more sophisticated form and if an individual has a better brain, let's say, then perhaps this is giving them an advantage over others to, to perpetrate white collar crime. How this then gets translated into punishment for white collar crime, I think it's ... I'm not sure but certainly white collar crime is different to blue collar crime or street crime. There are different factors underlying here, the white collar criminals don't have the risk factors that the street offenders, the violent offenders have.

I think the public will say, they didn't have any of the risk factors for crime. They should even be punished more harshly than some of the street offenders.

So we're going back to retribution, right?

We go back to retribution because

“I think the perception with white collar criminals is that they have full control, they have free will”

He's got full free will, he should be punished more.

It gets very difficult and tortuous really. And then I think it goes back also to the fact that surprisingly, we have very little research on white collar criminals.

In criminology, the conception of the white collar criminal is that it's not the individual, it's the institution. It's the institutional atmosphere that creates an atmosphere for white collar crime. Because criminology at its heart is sociological. It doesn't look as psychologists do at individual differences.

[to be continued]