

Analysis of Influencing Factors in the Occurrence of Individual Extreme Violent Criminal Behavior from the Perspective of Life Course Theory

--A Case Study of the “Bai Baoshan Case”

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Abstract

With increasing economic downward pressure and intensifying social inequality, the marginalization of individuals at the bottom of society has become increasingly prominent. Studying the occurrence mechanism of individual extreme violent criminal behavior is of great theoretical and practical significance for understanding the interactive relationship between social structure and individual behavior and formulating effective prevention strategies. From the perspective of life course theory, this study conducts an in-depth analysis of the “Bai Baoshan Case” combined with typical cases, revealing Bai Baoshan’s gradual marginalization process from family breakdown to social exclusion in the temporal and spatial dimension. In the sequential dimension, it explores the contributing influences of his early psychological trauma, social exclusion, and prison experience on the formation of his criminal personality. Correlation analysis demonstrates the negative effects of these events on his emotional and social cognitive biases. Agency analysis emphasizes the individual’s stress response under psychological and social pressure. On this basis, this paper proposes a comprehensive governance strategy encompassing early intervention, education promotion, judicial reform, and community support, providing theoretical support and policy recommendations for the prevention of extreme violent crime and offering corresponding decision-making basis for the social governance of individual extreme violent criminal behavior.

Keywords

Life course theory; individual extreme violent criminal behavior; influencing factors; Bai Baoshan Case.

1. Introduction

With the global economic downturn, countries universally face challenges such as rising unemployment rates, intensifying social inequality, and increasing life pressures on low- and middle-income groups. This deterioration in the macroeconomic environment directly impacts individuals’ psychological states and behavioral manifestations, causing those at the bottom of society to feel a strong sense of abandonment and helplessness. This psychological state can easily be transformed into behavior that opposes social norms, with extreme violent crime being one manifestation. Against this social backdrop, research on individual extreme violent criminal behavior is particularly important. It not only helps us understand how individuals may take extreme behavioral paths during economic adversity but also provides strategies for society to prevent and intervene in such crimes. Therefore, from the perspective of life course theory and through a typical case study, this paper reveals the correlation between social structure and individual criminal behavior, explores the occurrence mechanisms and

influencing factors of individual extreme violent criminal behavior, and thereby provides theoretical support for policymakers. By designing a more effective social safety net and psychological intervention programs, this paper aims to prevent and reduce the occurrence of individual extreme violent behavior and enhance overall social stability.

2. Literature Review

The academic community, both domestically and internationally, has accumulated a certain amount of research on individual extreme violent criminal behavior. These studies have explored the causes and prevention strategies of individual extreme violent behavior from various disciplinary perspectives, laying a solid foundation for further analysis in this study. From the perspective of domestic research, Zhao Qizhi and Kang Jie focus on a sociopsychological analysis, arguing that role conflicts and role deviations experienced during the process of socialization may lead to deviations in individuals' social perceptions. The "power guidance" mechanism in society may amplify individuals' competitive psychology and, under the stimulation of specific events, induce extreme violent behavior. They suggest preventing extreme violent incidents by alleviating role conflicts, reconstructing social cognition, and weakening competitive psychology. Zeng Hongzhi, from a socio-economic perspective, explores how the lack of intimate relationships, confusion in self-identity, and social role conflicts in family and professional life contribute to extreme violent behavior. He advocates for effective prevention of extreme violent behavior by cultivating intimate relationships, strengthening self-awareness, and reconstructing social roles. Jia Junqiang, based on Merton's sociological theory of deviance, analyzes how the "disappointed group" during social transformation becomes the main perpetrators of extreme violent incidents. He advocates addressing the root of the problem by adjusting the income distribution system, improving social mobility mechanisms, and perfecting the social security system, in order to achieve a balance of social interests and social stability and harmony. Feng Weiguo believes that individual extreme violent behavior should be comprehensively governed at the macro, meso, and micro levels, emphasizing the dual importance of the rule of law and social control. He proposes strategies such as improving the social security prevention and control system, enhancing emergency response capabilities, and strengthening the construction of social mindset.

Overseas research primarily focuses on exploring the underlying factors that contribute to individual extreme violent criminal behavior. Jonathan H. Turner attributes extreme violent behavior to the transformation of individuals' repressed negative emotions, which ultimately manifest as a complex combination of anger and satisfaction-happiness. Terrorism, gang violence, and genocide arise from shame experienced by individuals in critical institutional domains and its subsequent repression. Don Weenink analyzes individual extreme violent behavior from a micro-sociological perspective, arguing that such behavior is a manifestation of social role imbalance, with attackers attempting to regain emotional balance by exercising complete control over victims. Christopher J. Ferguson and Kevin M. Beaver, on the other hand, explore extreme violent behavior from a biological perspective. They examine genetic polymorphisms associated with this behavior and discuss how genetic risk interacts with environmental stressors to increase the risk of extreme violent behavior. Their research provides a scientific understanding of the biological roots of extreme violent behavior.

The academic community both domestically and internationally has provided a wealth of theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses on individual extreme violent criminal behavior, covering various disciplinary fields such as social psychology, socio-economics, microsociology, and biology. These studies have explored the causes, manifestations, and prevention strategies of extreme violent behavior from different perspectives. Domestic research primarily focuses

on role conflicts during socialization, deviations in social cognition, and the impact of socio-economic structures. In contrast, overseas research emphasizes individual psychodynamics, social role imbalance, and biological-genetic factors. Although these studies offer valuable perspectives and methodologies for understanding and preventing individual extreme violent behavior, they still have some shortcomings. Firstly, most existing research focuses on analysis within specific domains and lacks interdisciplinary integrated research methods, which may result in an incomplete understanding of the causes of extreme violent behavior. Secondly, the majority of studies concentrate on behavioral analysis during adulthood, paying less attention to how an individual's developmental trajectory from childhood to adulthood influences the formation of behavioral patterns. Thirdly, existing research has not provided in-depth analysis of the interaction between biological factors and psychosocial factors and their combined impact on behavior. Therefore, this paper aims to address these deficiencies through case studies from a life course perspective. This research approach can help us more comprehensively understand the developmental trajectory of criminal behavior from childhood to adulthood, explore how environmental and psychological factors interact at different life stages to influence the tendency towards individual extreme violent criminal behavior, and, consequently, through life course research, identify potential risk factors earlier, formulate more targeted prevention and intervention measures, thereby effectively preventing the occurrence of extreme violent behavior at early stages of individual development.

3. Research methods and theoretical framework

3.1. A case study and typical cases

The case study method exhibits significant applicability in the research on individual extreme violent criminal behavior, primarily due to the need for an in-depth exploration of the complex psychological and social motivations behind such behaviors. A case study provides a profound understanding of the criminal motives, behavioral patterns, and psychological characteristics of specific individuals. By focusing on individual cases, the research can examine the environmental conditions, individual experiences, and psychological states before and after the crime, as well as the social networks that may influence criminal behavior. This approach reveals unique psychological and environmental factors that may be overlooked in general research. This aligns with Qu Jingdong's view on the scientific nature of case studies, which can embody a possible explanation for society as a whole. He argues, "The strategy of case studies differs from hypothesis testing based on representativeness and is not merely a simple description or narration of social life. Rather, it starts with typical cases to uncover operational mechanisms emerging from specific societies, expanding, extending, and integrating associations with various external political, social, and cultural factors in breadth and depth, ... demonstrating multiple continuous correlations and covariations among various social elements, discovering dominant social mechanisms or logics, and ultimately presenting a complete picture of society as a whole through a structured approach."

Therefore, this paper selects the "Bai Baoshan Case", a notable criminal case in the history of Chinese criminal investigation, for analysis. Here is an overview of the case: Bai Baoshan, male, Han nationality, was born on November 6, 1958, in Shijingshan District, Beijing, with his ancestral home located in Xushui District, Baoding City, Hebei Province. He is a highly representative and notorious criminal in the history of Chinese criminal investigation. Starting from December 1982, he was initially sentenced to four years in prison for multiple thefts and robberies, which was later commuted to fifteen years. This experience nurtured a strong desire for revenge against society within him. During his imprisonment, he killed two fellow inmates and was subsequently released from prison early. After his release, Bai Baoshan faced numerous difficulties in life, leading to hostility towards police and other groups. On March 31,

1996, he knocked out a sentry at a power plant in western Beijing, seizing a semi-automatic rifle and using it to commit multiple violent acts, resulting in the deaths of five policemen and the injury of eight others. In 1997, he fled to Xinjiang and continued to commit crimes. Bai Baoshan continued to rob and kill throughout the year, with his violent behavior reaching a terrifying level. According to statistics, Bai Baoshan committed 12 crimes, nine of which specifically targeted military and police personnel, killing 15 people and robbing a total amount of over 1.4 million Chinese yuan. He was captured on September 5, 1997, and executed the following April.

3.2. Life course theory

Life course theory emerged as a major research paradigm in the 1960s, with the life course research represented by Professor G. Elder in the United States experiencing rapid development in the social sciences. This theory views individuals as subjects who continually play social roles and participate in life events in a certain sequence throughout their lives. It attempts to link the individual and social significance of life by describing the structure and sequence of life trajectories and turning points of significant individual events, with the temporal dimension serving as an important direction in seeking this connection. Life course theory provides a unique analytical framework in studying individual extreme violent criminal behavior, exploring the roots of extreme behavior by comprehensively considering the spatiotemporal background, the sequential nature of life events, the correlations between events, and individual agency.

From this theoretical perspective, individual behavior is not merely a direct manifestation of personal traits but rather the result of a complex interplay of various factors throughout an individual's life course. The spatiotemporal background provides external conditions and internal motivations for individual behavior. Extreme violent behavior by individuals is commonly observed during specific historical periods marked by social unrest, cultural conflict, or economic hardship, which create an "enabling environment" for criminal behavior and make violence a means for some individuals to resolve conflicts or express dissatisfaction. Sequentiality examines the chronological order and causal chains of life events in an individual's life. For instance, early experiences of abuse may lead to aggressive behavior during adolescence, which may then evolve into severe violent crimes in adulthood. By tracing this sequence, researchers can identify potential intervention points to prevent the development of criminal behavior. Correlation analysis explores how events in an individual's life influence each other, resulting in long-term psychological and behavioral consequences. For example, an individual may develop aggressive behavior due to an imbalanced family environment (such as parental divorce or domestic violence), which is further reinforced through social feedback (like peer rejection or school punishment). This analysis also considers how individuals seek support or face exclusion within different social networks, as the nature of these social relationships can profoundly impact an individual's behavioral patterns. Agency emphasizes that individuals are not passive recipients of environmental influences throughout their life course but rather actively respond to their environment and, to some extent, become agents in choosing their behavioral paths.

4. Multidimensional interpretation of life course: the mechanism behind Bai Baoshan's extreme violent criminal behavior

4.1. Temporality and spatiality: from family disintegration to social marginalization

From the perspective of life course theory, an individual's behaviors and decisions are deeply influenced by the temporal and spatial environments throughout their life course. Bai

Baoshan's extreme violent behavior can be analyzed through significant temporal and spatial nodes in his life, revealing how his personal journey was profoundly impacted by social changes and personal circumstances. Born in 1958 into a Beijing worker's family, Bai Baoshan enjoyed relatively privileged living conditions. However, the premature death of his father plunged the family into financial difficulties, forcing him to relocate to Hebei. This drastic change in his life had an initial negative impact on his psychological development. During this stage, he experienced a transition from material stability to insecurity, a drastic change that may have triggered feelings of distrust towards his environment and a passive defensive mindset.

Upon entering adulthood, the social reality Bai Baoshan faced was the economic opportunities brought about by the reform and opening-up in the 1980s. However, instead of benefiting from this economic boom, he ended up imprisoned for theft, an experience that exacerbated his dissatisfaction and sense of exclusion towards the social structure. During his prison life, he came into contact with criminals from various places, and the uniqueness of this environment provided fertile ground for the formation of his criminal mindset. Instead of choosing to reform himself, Bai Baoshan exchanged criminal experiences and antisocial sentiments with other inmates, which distorted his psychological and behavioral patterns.

After being released from prison and returning to Beijing, Bai Baoshan found himself possessing nothing, and his household registration had even been cancelled. The discriminatory environment towards reformed criminals made it difficult for him to find a job to support his family. He chose to make a living by setting up stalls on the street but often faced reprimands from relevant authorities. These temporal and spatial circumstances further marginalized him socially, and he found it difficult to reintegrate into society through legal means. The predicaments of life, psychological despair, and hostility towards society influenced his choice to resort to extreme violent behavior. This series of temporal and spatial nodes in his life course, such as the disintegration of his family in childhood, living under someone else's roof during adolescence, the breakdown of his family in adulthood, the influence of the prison environment, and social exclusion, to some extent, shaped the path of Bai Baoshan's extreme behavior.

4.2. Cumulative psychological trauma and behavioral distortion in the sequence of life events

From the perspective of life course theory, the formation of Bai Baoshan's personal extreme violent behavior is closely related to the sequential occurrence of a series of critical events in his life. Life course theory emphasizes the long-term impact of the sequence of individual life events on their psychological development and behavioral patterns. In Bai Baoshan's life course, the sequence of events such as early family changes, lack of education, social marginalization, and criminal punishment had a profound impact on his psychological state and behavioral orientation. Losing his father at the age of two and being sent to Hebei, this drastic family change inflicted initial trauma on his young mind, and the lack of parental love was the source of his early insecurity.

As he entered school age, due to the age difference from his peers and the lack of a basic educational background, he felt extreme inferiority and exclusion at school, which deepened his distrust and hostility towards society. Subsequently, in early adulthood, from establishing a family to its breakdown, this further intensified his antisocial behavior. The sequential arrangement of these events, with each node influencing him, gradually pushed him towards the brink of extreme behavior. It is evident that Bai Baoshan's extreme violent behavior did not occur in isolation but was the culmination of a series of unfortunate events in his life course.

4.3. Accumulation of emotions and outburst of behavior: an interpretation of the relevance in Bai Baoshan's life course

The concept of “relevance” in life course theory emphasizes how various events and experiences in an individual's life are interconnected and collectively shape their psychological state and behavioral patterns. For Bai Baoshan, a series of interconnected unfortunate experiences in his life course collectively contributed to his extreme violent behavior. The helplessness and bullying by peers during his childhood caused early psychological trauma, which accumulated deep distrust and hostility in his heart. Subsequent setbacks in education and social integration, particularly his experiences in prison, further intensified his resentment towards society. These emotions transformed into deep psychological distortion and a vengeful mindset after learning of the extension of his prison sentence and the further breakdown of his family—the departure of his wife and the abuse of his daughter.

These events are not only temporally interconnected, forming a continuous chain of psychological trauma and social exclusion, but also create a complex interaction on both emotional and cognitive levels, gradually transforming Bai Baoshan's personal pain and despair into aggression and violent behavior towards the outside world. Especially in prison, the inescapable environment caused him to focus his anger and desire for revenge on specific targets—the inmate who informed on him and the entire judicial system. This accumulation of emotions triggered by a series of continuous unfortunate experiences in the past ultimately erupted in his behavioral choices, resulting in extreme violent actions. This analysis demonstrates that through the relevance perspective of life course theory, we can understand the psychological motivations behind Bai Baoshan's extreme behavior, namely, how an individual's specific experiences shape their attitudes and behavioral patterns towards society through continuous emotional and cognitive interactions. It further emphasizes the importance of preventing individuals at different life stages from engaging in extreme behavior by providing psychological and social support.

4.4. The dual nature of agency: choices and consequences in Bai Baoshan's life course

In life course theory, “agency” refers to the initiative and capacity demonstrated by individuals in their life courses to influence their own life trajectories and environments. For Bai Baoshan, his life course exemplifies both positive and negative impacts of agency. Due to the early loss of parental care, Bai Baoshan underwent significant changes in his personality and made the decision to drop out of school at 15 and start working. This decision showcased his independent agency in the face of life's difficulties, as he attempted to adapt to and change his environment through self-reliance, demonstrating a positive agency in actively meeting societal demands.

However, Bai Baoshan's agency also had negative impacts. Between economic hardships and personal ambitions, he chose to resolve his financial issues through illegal means—*theft*. This choice reflects the negative aspect of agency when individuals face societal structural issues, such as inadequate education and limited career opportunities. Although his agency temporarily solved his economic problems, in the long run, it led him into a life of crime, ultimately resulting in his social marginalization and psychological distortion. Especially during his time in prison, where he gained access to knowledge about firearms, he not only learned about them but also deepened his dependence on violence. This further demonstrates how, under the influence of pressure and environment, agency can be misdirected and lead to negative consequences.

5. Suggestions for preventing individual extreme violent criminal behavior

Through a comprehensive perspective of life course theory in analyzing Bai Baoshan's extreme violent behavior, it is evident that his personal actions and decisions were deeply influenced by critical temporal and spatial nodes in his life course. Bai Baoshan's life trajectory reveals that the breakdown of his family environment and lack of education in his early years laid the groundwork for his subsequent behavior. As an adult, economic hardships and experiences of social marginalization intensified his dissatisfaction and sense of exclusion towards the social structure. In the unique environment of prison, he not only came into contact with various criminals but also developed a vengeful mindset towards society in the absence of positive rehabilitation and support. This mindset gradually accumulated amidst social exclusion and continuous criminal experiences, ultimately erupting in a series of negative life events, leading to extreme violent behavior. Based on the analysis of Bai Baoshan's individual extreme violent criminal behavior, this paper proposes that prevention of such behavior can be approached from the following four aspects:

Firstly, focus should be placed on early intervention and mental health support. Life course theory highlights the long-term impact of early life experiences on individual behavior. For individuals with unstable family backgrounds and early psychological trauma, social service agencies should provide timely mental health assessments and interventions. It is recommended to strengthen mental health education at the school and community levels, disseminate knowledge about mental health, and, at the same time, provide ongoing psychological counseling services for children at risk to help them establish a sense of security and reduce the long-term negative impacts of early trauma.

Secondly, emphasis should be given to promoting educational opportunities and social integration. The lack of education and social marginalization are significant factors pushing individuals towards extreme behavior. Policies and community support should be implemented to ensure that all children have access to basic and continued education, particularly those from disadvantaged groups. Adult education and vocational training programs are crucial for improving the living conditions of these individuals and enhancing their sense of social integration. Additionally, society should reduce discrimination against former criminals and provide more employment opportunities and social services to help them smoothly transition back into society.

Thirdly, reforms in the judicial system and penal institutions are necessary. In the case of Bai Baoshan, his prison experience had a direct impact on the formation of his extreme behavior. The judicial system should focus on improving prison environments to ensure that incarceration serves not only as punishment but also as a place for rehabilitation and education. Prisons should increase psychological counseling and behavioral correction programs, providing prisoners with opportunities for learning and personal growth, especially in areas such as vocational skills, social adaptability, and mental health management.

Lastly, advocating for community support and social participation is crucial. Strengthening community cohesion and support systems is key to preventing extreme behavior. Communities should provide a variety of support services, such as legal aid, economic assistance, and family support services, to alleviate individuals' economic and social pressures. Encouraging communication and mutual assistance among community members, enhancing connections among residents through community activities, and establishing a positive and healthy social environment are also conducive to "building a prevention and control system involving the entire community".

Overall, strategies to prevent extreme violent behavior require comprehensive measures at multiple levels, including individuals, families, society, and institutions. Ensuring that necessary

psychological, educational, and social support is provided from the early stages of an individual's life, along with effective reforms at the legal and institutional levels, collectively constitute a multidimensional defense against extreme behavior. Through such comprehensive strategies, the risk of individuals developing into extreme actors can be effectively reduced, enhancing the safety and harmony of the entire society.

6. Conclusion

This paper employs the life course theory as an analytical framework to delve into the mechanisms underlying individual extreme violent criminal behavior. Through a detailed analysis of the Bai Baoshan case, it not only uncovers the deep-seated psychological and social causes of Bai Baoshan's extreme violent behavior but also proposes comprehensive prevention strategies based on early intervention, education promotion, judicial reform, and community support. These strategies provide both theoretical foundations and practical suggestions for addressing such criminal behaviors. While this thesis constructs a systematic analytical framework based on the life course theory and conducts a detailed analysis of a typical case, the research still has certain limitations. The single-case study approach has advantages in revealing the depth and uniqueness of complex behavioral mechanisms, but its external validity is relatively limited, potentially failing to comprehensively generalize the characteristics of criminal behavior across different contexts, especially the dynamic changes of individual agency in specific situations. Future research should further expand in two directions. For one thing, it is necessary to validate the theoretical framework of this paper through multi-case studies or quantitative research methods to enhance the universal applicability and scientific rigor of the research, exploring the similarities and differences in the impact of life course events on extreme violent behavior across different social backgrounds. For another, research should deepen the investigation of the interactive mechanisms between individual psychological and social factors, particularly by integrating emotional dynamics and social network analysis to uncover how individuals form behavioral decisions through cognitive and emotional processing in specific environments, providing more precise support for social governance and crime prevention.

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