NEUROSCIENCE & PUBLIC POLICY SEMINAR

NEUROCRIMINOLOGY: NEUROETHICAL AND NEUROLEGAL IMPLICATIONS
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4:00 PM
341 BARDEEN

The very rapid developments taking place in brain imaging science on crime (neurocriminology) is creating a tension between on the one hand our concepts of responsibility and justice, and on the other understanding and mercy. Neurocriminology is a new subfield of criminology, a social science discipline that has traditionally suppressed biological insights into the causes of crime. Now, a burgeoning body of scientific evidence is documenting beyond reasonable doubt structural and functional brain impairments not just in antisocial, violent, and psychopathic individuals, but also in white collar criminals.

There are also prediction implications. Poor fear conditioning as early as age 3 years (reflecting poor amygdala functioning) predisposes to crime at age 23 years. Furthermore, the brain circuits found to be impaired in offenders parallel the brain circuits found to underlie moral decision-making, and recent research is documenting impairments in psychopaths to the neural circuitry underlying moral decision-making.

The neuroethical and neurolegal implications of this research will be discussed, focusing on the concepts of moral responsibility, free will, and punishment. If a young baby suffers trauma, abuse, and insults to brain structure / function early on in life, and if these factors predispose them to violence, and if they are not responsible for the brain and social trauma they suffered, are they truly responsible for their later violent behavior? Do they have full freedom of will? And if the neural circuitry underlying morality is compromised in offenders, is it morally wrong of us to punish prisoners as much as we do?

For additional information or questions, contact Jessica Karis: karis@wisc.edu or 262-4932