

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Messerschmidt, James W.: Masculinities and Crime

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Chapter Title: "Messerschmidt, James W.: Masculinities and Crime"

Pub. Date: 2010

Access Date: September 12, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412959186

Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n172>

Print pages: 620-624

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n172>

Gender is one of the most stable and pronounced demographic associations with criminality. Men commit the vast majority of most crimes, especially serious crimes. In hindsight, one may wonder why a book placing men's crimes and criminality in the context of their lives as *men* did not appear until 1993. After all, much criminology was done with all-male samples by male researchers. Yet the gendered (or sexed) nature of crime was taken for granted. While some early scholars examined social and cultural structures that would be linked to masculinities concerns by later researchers (e.g., Walter Miller's focal concerns or Albert Cohen's status frustration), at the time they were presented in an a-gendered fashion. As feminist criminology developed in the 1970s, the problem of women's and girls' offending became central for the first time. Early feminist criminologists attacked the discipline as either ignoring the existence of female crime and criminality or dismissing it in stereotypical ways. It took seriously a project of measuring and explaining crimes by women and girls, developing into a theoretically rich and empirically diverse subfield. Women's crime and justice experiences were typically explained by placing women's lived experiences in a gendered context. The next logical step was the application of gender theory to men's lives and offending.

Masculinities and Crime

In *Masculinities and Crime*, James Messerschmidt presents a solid review and critique of existing feminist and criminological theory. He not only takes criminology to task for failing to adequately deal with issues of gender, but he also critiques existing feminist theories for their failures as well (both in and out of a criminological context). He offers up as an alternative to these problematic interpretations his own *theory of structured action* (later a book on its own). Structured action is predicated on two central critiques presented in the book, as well as from Messerschmidt's prior book, *Capitalism, Patriarchy and Crime*. The first emphasis is on what is now often referred to as intersectionality: the idea that "it is necessary to make relevant theoretical links among class, gender and race *without* surrendering to some type of separate systems approach" (1993, p. 62, emphasis added). Clearly all three of these aspects of social structure influence a person's experiences and behavior. But to look only at one and exclude the others means that essential information is missed.

Socialist feminism downplayed race and gender, looking to class systems to explain women's experiences of inequity. Radical feminism, with its sole focus on patriarchy, missed how class systems influence gender inequity. Similarly, emergent black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks criticized feminism for ignoring race and ethnicity. [p. 620 ↓] Structured action theory shows that while each of these elements may vary independently of each other, they work together to create a social context in which social actors perceive, interpret, and project their own actions and the actions of others. All three are important elements in their own right but do not come together without intermixing their effects.

The second foundation is the realization that these structures arise and are replicated through social actors and their actions. This idea comes from sociological symbolic interactionism. For much of the 20th century, social theory had trouble linking two of its main objects of study. At the macro level, sociologists explored how social forces shaped the experiences of various groups in society. Others examined individual-level experiences of social actors and how people interacted with their most immediate social environments and stimuli to produce behavior. Decision making and perception were key foci of this social psychology. Yet, conceptually, these two realms of study were rarely linked together to show how these macro-level forces were working on individual-level perceptions and actions. A strain of sociological thought began developing in the 1960s and 1970s, and was more fully realized in the 1980s and 1990s (in part, due to structured action theory), that resolved this problem by suggesting that individuals cannot exist outside of social structure and social structure does not exist without its (re)creation as embodied in behavior. As Messerschmidt puts it, "social actors maintain and change social structures within any particular interaction, and those social structures simultaneously enable and constrain social action" (1993, p. 63). Conceptually, action and structure are fused together in a dialectical dance of cross-influence. Macro-level forces and trends shape the environments that social actors live in and gain information and other inputs from. Such experiences are internalized and influenced by an individual's specific experiences and worldview. From there, the person acts. Acting in a given way creates patterns of behavior that shape an environment, which is then perceived by other social actors, shaping their behavior, and so on.

In exploring this set of postulates, Messerschmidt brings together numerous strands of work done within symbolic interactionism generally and feminist studies specifically. He draws heavily upon the work of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkle, establishing the mutually reinforcing nature of structure and action. He also explicitly draws on the work of Candace West and others on gender performance. Simply, West and numerous colleagues over the years have demonstrated that individuals enact gender performances based upon their perceptions of audience expectations. As a person is socialized into a set of gender expectations, they enact (or do not) those scripts when in a social situation. This is *doing gender*—the process of conforming one's behavior to a set of specific gender expectations. This view of gendered behavior and relations breaks us conceptually out of the narrow confines of sex role theory (especially the representation of gender as two opposite set of “choices” for behavior). A lifetime of lived experiences composes an individual's gender scripts, whose enactment will vary in various interactions based upon specific audience expectations. Establishing the performative nature of gender is essential to understanding the link between masculinities and crime.

The result of this theoretical situation is the realization that “crime by men is a form of social practice invoked as a resource, when other resources are unavailable, for accomplishing masculinity” (1993, p. 85). To understand male crime one must place that crime commission in the broader context of social life and capital attainment. Men do crime to do masculinity. The enactment of crime becomes a way for men to “do gender.” For example, responding to a perceived threat or slight with violence (or even the threat thereof) is a way for men to demonstrate independence, control, and toughness, all key elements of masculinities in most societies. Further, Messerschmitt points out, that the very root of these conflicts often involves masculinity and masculine capital. Terming these interactions “masculinity challenges” in later work, Messerschmidt argues that the reason slights and threats require response is the tentative nature of masculinity and masculine reputations. While femininity is often assumed or bestowed upon women, men have to earn their masculinity in the eyes of others. If presented with a social interaction potentially involving the loss of face (which is almost any interaction), men may find that they have to guard their reputations from others. The core of conflicts are between social actors who are both trying to gain and maintain masculine capital. Violence is a way to do masculinity as it simultaneously [p.

621 ↓] (1) establishes one's ability to draw upon those assets of human bodies and behavior that are typically regarded as masculine (i.e., toughness, strength, courage); (2) prevents one from losing "maleness" in the eyes of one's peers, which would occur if a challenge were ignored; and (3) establishes dominance and power over the other party in the conflict, if successful, through victory. Such an explanation has been frequently used to discuss the gender gap in lethal and non-lethal violence. Men are more likely than women to get into violent disputes and men's disputes (compared with women's) are more likely to cause serious injury or death to combatants. This is a major contribution to understanding the interlinkage of masculinity and crime. However, there is one more theoretical layer to Messerschmidt's structured action theory.

There is no monolithic masculinity or femininity—there is no single way to do masculinity or to do femininity. Men's behavioral performances and demands vary within various structural locations. To explain this variation, Messerschmidt calls on the work of R. W. Connell on hegemony and variations of masculinity. Conceptualizing gender roles and relations as being centrally about power, Connell notes that gender positions are defined not only by what they are but also in opposition to what they are not. Masculinity is defined by femininity and vice versa. Further, within any given social context, there will be plural masculinities and femininities. Connell identifies hegemonic masculinity as the most desired and most empowered form of masculinity within a social milieu. Hegemonic masculinity defines itself in relation to femininities but also in relation to subordinate masculinities. Subordinate masculinities are those ways of being male that are denigrated and unvalued within a social context. The base realization here is that men not only oppress women to maintain their positions of power, but they also oppress other men. Sexuality is an excellent example. Most hegemonic masculinities are compulsorily heterosexual. Heterosexual activity becomes a central way of proving one's maleness. Similarly, heterosexual masculinity is empowered through the denigration and oppression of homosexuality and bisexuality, with men engaging in these acts being typically defined (and treated) as weak and effeminate. This proposition reconnects us with intersectionality and structured action theory is fully laid out. To understand any behavior, but especially criminal behavior, one must place that behavior squarely within the social interactional context and place social actors within the broader and immediate frames of reference.

Messerschmitt establishes that not only is masculinity constructed in relation to social position and in relation to femininity but also in relation to other masculinities relevant in the social milieu. White men will do masculinity differently from black men. Upper-class men do masculinity differently from working-class men. Within each of these intersected milieu, there are several options for masculinity enactment, with general social pressures (and thus social actors) placing greater value upon hegemonic forms of masculinity than subordinate forms. Just as masculinity varies between social contexts, it varies within social contexts. Establishing dominance through, say, success in sports (i.e., “jock” masculinity) is only meaningful when situated in opposition to another masculinity within the same context (i.e., “nerd” masculinity). Social capital can only be gained in interactions through displaying heterosexual sexual conquest if it can be contrasted with others who lack that capital, say, male virgins or homosexuals.

This theoretical positioning allows Messerschmidt to show us that men within certain social positions use crime as a sign of masculinity accomplishment. But because the nature and demands of a specific masculinity depend on the distinct interaction of structural location and social actor performances, men do crimes differently to do masculinities differently. That becomes the central focus of chapter 4 (“Boys Will Be Boys—Differently”) and chapter 5 (“Varieties of ‘Real Men’”) of the book, both of which have been widely excerpted and anthologized. Typically, a reader on crime includes an edited version of either of these chapters in their section on gender and crime. They also appear ubiquitously in readers focused on gender and crime, as well as in general books directed at sociology and gender studies courses.

These two chapters explore how varying social contexts—racial and class-based—produce the impulses to crime in the boys and men which inhabit them. Chapter 4 provides discussions of how race and class intersect in the lives of adolescents to produce a wide variety of criminal behavior ranging from street robbery, to gang membership and violence, to petty theft and delinquency to gang [p. 622 ↓] rape. Chapter 5 provides focused case studies on specific environments and their ties to crime: urban streetlife subculture and the production of both the pimp and the “badass,” workplaces and the production of theft and sexual harassment, and corporate culture and the production of corporate crimes. The value here is not only in the narrowed discussions of specific milieu but the broad scope of discussions. Men dominate almost all crimes, from petty street theft to corporate crimes and crimes of nation-states. In

these two chapters, Messerschmidt shows how structured action theory can explain all of these behaviors (something very few other theories of crime can do).

His final chapter of the book goes beyond crime commission to the process of criminalization itself. Through exploring the influence of gender and gendered politics on the behaviors of the state, Messerschmidt explores how masculine dominance and world views within governments and other public institutions shape social control endeavors. His gendered analysis of the regulation of child labor, female sexual “morality,” and the nature and functioning of policing and police work highlight that structured action theory is also amenable to the other concerns which arise in the field of criminology—law making and implementation.

Legacy

Landmark as it was, *Masculinities and Crime*, and the ideas within, took time to gain currency within the field, even within a feminist criminology focused on gender issues. In part, this was due to broader tensions and ambivalences within feminist academia overall about gendering the study of men. The field had created itself through critiquing academe's patriarchal biases and was not terribly quick to return to studies focused on men as it could serve to remarginalize the study of women and women's experiences. With the exception of a handful of publications (e.g., a special issue in *The British Journal of Criminology* [Volume 36, issue 3, 1996] and Tim Newburn and Elizabeth Stanko's edited volume on masculinity and crime published in 1994), the idea of exploring the gendered nature of men's crimes was ignored. For example, Kathleen Daly's contribution to Michael Tonry's 1998 *Handbook of Crime and Justice* contained a single paragraph on issues of masculinities and crime, spending half of it suggesting that studying men's crimes as gendered was a return to the discipline's gender blindness. It was not until Jody Miller and Christopher Mullins's chapter in the 15th volume of the *Advances in Criminological Theory* series that a survey article either on feminist criminology or upon gender and crime contained a substantial section devoted to the issues of masculinities.

Messerschmidt has continued to elaborate both theoretically and empirically upon the core ideas he presented in this work. Two later books, *Nine Lives* and *Flesh and Blood*

not only expand the nuances of structured action theory (e.g., through incorporation of other advances in feminist theory like attention to bodies and bodilyity) but do so within an empirical context. Both books are grounded in life-history interviews, which allows for complex and situated explorations of how individual social actors' lived experiences and world views show an intersection of situated gender accomplishment and criminality. It also allows for richer development of the theory overall and the refinement that empirical research always brings.

Others have also taken their cue from this book, producing a burgeoning criminology of men as gendered social actors. Little in the way of quantitative work has appeared testing the core theory discussed here, in part due to the difficulties of quantified operationalization of central concepts. However, qualitative researchers have expanded the project laid out here. Many interview and ethnographic based studies have drawn either directly or indirectly on structured action theory to examine the intersection of masculinities and crime by focusing on specific crimes or specific contexts. These works have examined different masculinities in different contexts, showing the richness and wide applicability of Messerschmidt's work. Less has been done with white-collar crime and masculinity; in part this is due to the marginalized nature of white-collar crime studies, but it is also a function of obtaining appropriate data.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n172>

See also

- [Miller, Jody: Gendered Criminal Opportunity](#)
- [Miller, Jody: Gendered Social Organization Theory](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J.: Organization Properties and Sex Segregation in the Underworld](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J., and Emilie Andersen Allan: A Gendered Theory of Offending](#)

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