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Steffensmeier, Darrell J.,
and Emilie Andersen Allan: a
Gendered Theory of offending

Contributors: Jennifer Schwartz

Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox

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The 1960s cultural revolution, including the women's movement, focused attention and created a spate of research on female offending. Although it had long been known that male offending surpassed female offending in frequency and seriousness, theory testing in criminology rarely involved female samples and theories of female offending were not yet well developed. Due to the changing social context, however, questions about the origins of female offending and whether they differ from those of males became central to sociological criminology in the 1970s. Scholars debated and empirically tested whether gender-neutral traditional theories of criminology or gender-specific theories could better explain female offending.

To develop a middle-range theory of gender and offending, Darrell J. Steffensmeier and Emilie Andersen Allan exhaustively reviewed theory and empirical research relating to female and male offending. *Middle-range theory* integrates general theories of behavior with empirical findings on group differences so as to better understand their origin and nature (Merton, 1957). Middle-range theory aims to integrate empirical observations and established social facts to drive theory building that generates propositions to be further tested. Middle-range theories converge into grander theoretical explanations as the subfield develops. Steffensmeier and Allan's gendered paradigm draws on causal forces identified by traditional crime theories but also integrates theory and research on gender, pointing to the importance of the *organization of gender* and biological sex differences as a starting point for future inquiry.

Steffensmeier and Allan's gendered paradigm draws on traditional crime theories (e.g., social learning, control, rational choice), feminist theories, and extant research to explain gender differences in the frequency and nature of crime—that is, the greater offending rates of males, particularly for more serious violent crimes and lucrative property crimes. Gendered approaches are most needed to understand serious offending where gender differences and gendered influences are greatest. The paradigm also addresses contextual differences in female and male offending, such as women's greater victimization of intimates and family; their tendency to work alone or, if in organized crime groups, to play secondary or sexual roles; and female motivations and pathways that involve victimization by men, romantic involvements with men, and protection of children and relationships.

Steffensmeier and Allan's approach encompasses both general as well as gendered influences in elucidating the complexities of criminal behavior. This perspective takes the approach that the broad contours of traditional criminological theories can explain variation in both female and male offending, but that gendered concerns mediate how criminogenic factors shape the form and frequency of offending. The organization of gender mediates some of the effects of broad social forces on offending.

The gendered paradigm explains differences in the form and frequency of women's and men's [p. 886 ↓] offending as derived from the organization of gender, as well as physical and sexual differences. The organization of gender refers to gender differentiated identities, roles, and commitments and the institutions and social arrangements that construct gender and, consequently, shape motives and opportunities for offending.

Steffensmeier and Allan identify five key elements of the organization of gender that increase the probability of prosocial responses by females and antisocial responses by males and condition gender differences in motives and opportunities for offending. They are (1) gender norms and focal concerns, (2) moral development and affiliative concerns, (3) social control, (4) physical strength and aggression, and (5) sexuality. These factors impact the willingness (motives) and ability (opportunities) of women and men to commit various crimes. After briefly describing the five areas, their applicability to understanding patterns of female and male offending are highlighted.

The Organization of Gender and Criminal Involvement

Gender Norms and Focal Concerns

Gender norms are unwritten, though commonly understood, guidelines defining appropriate behavior, beliefs, and attitudes for females and males. Gender norms are enforced socially and through internalized gender role socialization. Two powerful focal concerns orient femininity norms and impose greater taboos against female crime:

nurturant role obligations, and female beauty and sexual virtue. These focal concerns shape criminal opportunities, motivations, and risk-taking preferences and strategies both in general and by type of deviant response.

Women are socialized to be responsive to the needs of others and attentive to the physical and emotional well-being of people they care about (Haynie et al., 2007). Enactment of nurturing roles and obligations offers informal rewards and reinforces gender-related identities. Women are expected to establish and maintain kin and neighborly relationships, accept familial obligations such as child or elder care, act in a submissive, accommodating manner, and attend to their physical appearance while protecting their sexual virtue. These relational concerns tend to constrain and shape opportunities for illicit activity. In contrast, males are rewarded for acting independently and being adventurous, competitive, and unemotional. Men are expected to be brave, strong, aggressive, rational, independent, adventurous, and dominating.

Stereotypes of women as caring, submissive, and domestic are incompatible with crime, whereas definitions of masculinity—being ingenuitive, aggressive, or a risk taker—are more consonant with what is criminal. Expectations that women should be more guarded of their sexuality and concerned about physical appearances contrast with expectations that men should be sexually adventurous or even aggressive and concerned with displaying symbols of success or status. These differing gendered expectations regarding sexuality shape the availability and acceptability of deviant roles. Women's criminal roles tend to capitalize on female sexuality (e.g., prostitution, decoy) whereas men's criminal roles are more varied.

Moral Development and Affiliative Concerns

Closely related to gender norms, gender differences in moral development restrain women from violence and criminal behavior harmful to others. Women are socialized to an “ethic of care” that encourages women to be more responsive to the needs of others and to fear separation from loved ones. Men, however, are exposed to an “ethic of independence,” conditioning men toward status-seeking, even at the expense of others. Gendered affiliative concerns are such that women act as health sentries, especially for their sons and husbands/boyfriends, and they produce or transmit moral culture.

Affiliative concerns not only inhibit women from undertaking harmful criminal activities but also shape women's motives, such as violence to protect a loved one or criminal activity to preserve a relationship. Examples include buying drugs for a partner going through withdrawal, a physical altercation with a rival love interest of her partner, or murder/assault to protect a child from abuse (Schwartz, 2007). In contrast, men's ethic of independence encourages competitiveness, aggression, and status seeking. At the extremes of the seriousness spectrum, men predominate instrumental violent offenses such as profit-motivated kidnapping, extortion, bank robbery, dog fighting, and the trafficking/smuggling arms, drugs, human body parts, [p. 887 ↓] or endangered species (Schwartz et al., 2009). The male code of the streets is based on intense masculinity norms, and violence often results from challenges to one's reputation (Anderson, 1999).

Social Control

Females' behaviors are often more closely monitored and informally sanctioned, restricting female freedoms, associations with deviant others, and opportunities for illicit activities. Moreover, stricter supervision may also decrease women's willingness to commit crime by reducing their appetite for risk (or channeling it toward sustaining valued relationships) and increasing attachment to family or other authority figures and prosocial peers. Males, however, are not as closely supervised and spend more unstructured time with peers, increasing their ability and willingness to engage in risky behaviors, particularly those oriented toward status or competitive advantage.

Physical Strength and Aggression

On average, men are larger than women, have greater endurance, and possess more upper body strength. More controversial are sex differences in aggression and in the capacity for violence derived from hormonal or other physical features of men versus women. These physical differences may influence the frequency and nature of female and male offending because involvement in lucrative, violent, or organized crime often requires physical prowess for committing crimes, protection, enforcing contracts or agreements, and recruiting and managing criminal associates.

Equally important as actual physical differences, however, are social and cultural *perceptions* of women as less powerful, lacking the potential for violence, and more vulnerable to victimization. These social and cultural interpretations of average sex differences may limit women's willingness to engage in serious crime or hamper men's willingness to involve female partners in crime. Real or perceived physical differences may help to account for women's solo or secondary roles in crime, their disproportionate involvement in minor property offenses, and their defensive use of violence against partners and aggressive use of violence against smaller children.

Sexuality

Females may utilize their sexuality for criminal gain such as in prostitution or as a tool to gain entry into criminal groups. Female offenders may also use gender stereotypes by playing up their sexuality to dupe males, such as by appearing sexually available in order to set up a male robbery victim (Miller, 1998). Traditional notions of femininity and sexuality offer criminal opportunities for some and place limitations on others. For example, females are typically supervised more closely (e.g., by parents, partners) to guard against sexual exploitation or victimization but this monitoring may lessen girls' opportunities for deviance. Sexual and strength differences also increase the likelihood that females will align themselves with males for protection (e.g., as co-offenders).

The Context of Offending

Gender norms, biological differences, and gendered risk-taking preferences influence the *context of offending*—the circumstances and nature of the crime including the setting, victim, purpose of offense, and injury/loss. Therefore, females who commit violent crimes are more likely than males to target people they know and less likely to use weapons or cause severe injury. Female property offenders are less likely to confront their victims (e.g., embezzling versus robbery), and to steal lesser amounts and are more likely to justify their theft as for their family or spouse.

Research highlights how social arrangements related to gender and gendered inequalities shape motives and opportunities and, consequently, patterns of offending.

First, gendered social relations and dominant gender norms disadvantage females in terms of recruitment into crime groups and upward mobility within crime groups (Steffensmeier, 1983). Within crime groups, women tend to function in one of two roles: sexual roles that use or exploit female sexuality as a resource (e.g., prostitution, to gain entry into a crime group by aligning with a male) or “cover” roles in which women conceal criminal activity because they are viewed less suspiciously and as less threatening or dangerous or can take advantage of males by playing on gender stereotypes (e.g., appearing sexually available to set up a robbery victim).

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Crime groups tend to be male-dominated and controlled. The principle of homosocial reproduction suggests the powerful tend to reproduce themselves, particularly in highly stratified settings (Steffensmeier, 1983). Males, who control the underworld (as well as the upperworld), tend to choose other males with whom to work, associate, and do business. Existing gender norms and stereotypes further limit female opportunities for involvement in lucrative and more organized crime because male offenders typically view criminal work as too difficult or dangerous for women or as too degrading for them. Males are also reluctant to work with women because they are viewed as less skilled, more emotional and less trustworthy, and less capable of deploying violence (Steffensmeier, 1983; Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986). Existing gender stratification and gender norms often preclude women from developing skills and criminal social networks necessary for lucrative property crimes (Steffensmeier, 1986; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005). Rather women are placed in stereotypical gender roles within crime groups, which do not often lead to career advancement.

Lisa Maher and Kathleen Daly's research on women's roles in the crack cocaine drug market provides an excellent illustration of how gender norms and cultural perceptions of physical strength and aggression limit and shape patterns of female offending. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 3 years, they conclude that the drug trade is highly gender stratified, with women sometimes playing lesser roles such as “advertising” the drug, copping for others, or selling drug accessories; infrequently acting as street-level drug dealers; and almost never occupying high-level owner/manager positions.

Gender stereotypes of women as less threatening provided opportunities tangential to the drug trade for women as service providers to male patrons from outside the community. Less often, women were used temporarily as street dealers in high-risk situations because it was believed that they could operate under less suspicion from authorities. In this way, managers hoped to play on the “gendered blindspots” of law enforcement. Generally, though, women were perceived to lack the toughness and capacity for violence required for success in the drug trade. Females could not often develop criminal social networks or enhance their skills, maintaining the skewed sex ratio in the underworld. Although a few women became dealers through their roles as wives/girlfriends of distributors, more often males were selected into higher level positions by other males, sometimes their kin—a process of homosocial reproduction.

Female opportunities are somewhat more numerous in less organized, more amateur minor property crime operations (Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986). In their roles as girlfriends or wives, women are provided criminal opportunities for supportive roles as drivers, lookouts, and holders of stolen property, drugs, or weapons. Women also have unique advantages in cashing stolen or forged checks, welfare fraud, shoplifting, and other offenses that take place in the course of female-typical activities such as shopping or banking. This accounts for the narrower gender gap for minor property crime.

Conclusion

Steffensmeier and Allan's gendered paradigm values contributions of traditional theories but also takes seriously gendered aspects of social life and social change to advance the field's understanding of both male and female offending patterns. Steffensmeier and Allan systematized the proliferation of research on female crime and integrated it with existing scholarship on gender and on crime to develop a model that better explains females' relatively greater involvement in minor property and violent crimes compared to males' much greater involvement in serious violence and lucrative property crime. This theory has significantly enhanced understanding of the gender-crime relationship, one of the strongest identified by criminologists.

Future research calls for empirical tests that operationalize and test variables from Steffensmeier and Allan's gendered approaches. Intersectionalities between gender

and race, ethnicity, and disadvantage also should be articulated and explored. There is much value as well in qualitative work focused on local contexts of female and male offending that reveal how gender and gender-related arrangements and conditions continue to powerfully influence offending patterns.

Jennifer Schwartz

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See also

- [Messerschmidt, James W.: Masculinities and Crime](#)
- [Miller, Jody: Gendered Social Organization Theory](#)
- [Simpson, Sally S.: Gender, Class, and Crime](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J.: Organization Properties and Sex Segregation in the Underworld](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J., and Jeffery T. Ulmer: The Professional Fence](#)

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