Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature

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James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature: The Definitive Study of the Causes of Crime* (hereafter referred to simply as *Crime and Human Nature)* is a major work in criminological theory. When published in 1985, it was viewed as controversial for its insistence on an individual-level unit of analysis to explain crime which was at odds with the prevailing structural approach taken by sociological criminological theory. Nearly 25 years later, *Crime and Human Nature* is hailed as a work that marked a paradigm shift in criminology, one which embraced interdisciplinary perspectives to understand crime, particularly the roles of constructs from biology and neuropsychology that have been shown to underscore human behavior. Today, *Crime and Human Nature* is generally viewed as uncontroversial and, instead, as one of the works that helped usher criminology into the 21st century. This entry is organized into three sections: (1) it provides a general overview of *Crime and Human Nature*, (2) it describes the criminological reaction to it, and (3) it illustrates the contemporary place of *Crime and Human Nature* in criminological theory and criminological research.

Overview

Crime and Human Nature is one of the most influential theoretical works in criminology. With 1,000-plus citations, it is among the most cited books in the fields of criminology and criminal justice (Cohn & Farrington, 1994, 1998). To advance what they purported to be the definitive explanation for crime, Wilson and Herrnstein observed that there was tremendous variation among individuals in terms of their involvement in antisocial behavior.

[p. 1015 ↓]

Thus, whereas most people viewed crime as a course of action that should almost never be taken, others perceived that criminal behavior provided many rewards. Whereas most people had internalized fears and concerns about committing crime and being punished by the criminal justice system, others were behaviorally uninhibited and seemingly prone to commit crime. Whereas many people could defer gratification and thus maintain and complete responsibilities with distant payoffs, others had a short attention span and required almost immediate gratification of their desires. Whereas

many people were adequately controlled or deterred from committing crime by the mere threat of criminal prosecution, still others seemed to rarely or even never learn from punishment experiences. Finally, whereas most people successfully abstained from criminal activity—at least to the degree of never acquiring an arrest record—still others accumulated extensive arrest records based on the seriousness, length, and frequency with which they committed crime and other antisocial behaviors. In short, Wilson and Herrnstein wondered which biological, developmental, situational, and adaptive processes gave rise to individual characteristics that predict crime. And the bodies of scholarship that they chose to review centered on studies from an array of disciplines that generally showed individual-level variation in crime and factors that predispose people to commit crime.

To Wilson and Herrnstein, the etiology of crime stemmed from within the individual, and their central theoretical goal was to establish the fact that individuals differ at birth in the degree to which they are at risk for criminality. Although this appears at face value to suggest a genetic or natural propensity to crime, Wilson and Herrnstein overtly rejected such deterministic viewpoints. According to Wilson and Herrnstein, “there *is* a human nature that develops in intimate settings out of a complex interaction of constitutional and social factors, and that nature affects how people choose between the consequences of crime and its alternatives” (p. 508, emphasis in the original). In this sense, *Crime and Human Nature* literally attempted to describe the complex ways that constitutional and environmental factors—or nature and nurture—blend together to produce human dispositions and behavior.

The publication of *Crime and Human Nature* was seemingly destined to attract attention based on the scholarly reputations of its authors. Arguably, *Crime and Human Nature* is known as much for the star power of its authors as its substantive argument. By 1985, both Wilson and Herrnstein were accomplished authors, both were distinguished academics whose research crossed over into the public domain at least in terms of the media coverage of their works, and both were viewed as conservative which in academic circles is controversial (DeLisi, 2003). More than these external circumstances, however, *Crime and Human Nature* wrestled the study of crime from what Wilson and Herrnstein would suggest was the “stranglehold” of sociology.

Borrowing from economics, they articulated the idea that crime was fundamentally a matter of choice. As such, rational choice theory and the thought processes of individual actors were essential in understanding why some people committed crime and used violence against others. Borrowing from psychology, Wilson and Herrnstein articulated that choosing to commit crime was not simply the outcome of rational calculus but that choice was itself molded and influenced by an array of factors, such as family members, social class, environmental influences, and prior learning. Borrowing from biology, Wilson and Herrnstein suggested "the existence of biological predispositions means that circumstances that activate behavior in one person will not do so in another, that social forces cannot deter criminal behavior in 100 percent of the population, and that the distribution of crime within and across societies may, to some extent, reflect underlying distributions of constitutional factors. Crime cannot be understood without taking into account predispositions and their biological roots" (p. 103). With its insistence on the individual and its friendliness to biology and other academic perspectives, *Crime and Human Nature* shook the discipline of criminology and the behavioral sciences generally.

The Criminological Reaction to *Crime and Human Nature*

Unlike most academic books which are received by obscurity or an occasional review, *Crime and Human Nature* prompted considerable attention **[p. 1016 ↓]** from the popular press (e.g., *Time, Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*, among others) and criminological community alike. For instance, in *Scientific American*, Leon Kamin assessed,

> The Wilson and Herrnstein work ought not to be judged in isolation. Their selective use of poor data to support a muddled ideology of biological determinism is not unrepresentative of American social science in the sixth year of the Reagan presidency. The political climate of the times makes it easy to understand why social scientists now rush to locate the causes of social tensions in genes and in deep-rooted biological substrata. (p. 25)

In his review in *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Theodore Ferdinand characterized *Crime and Human Nature* as overly simple and a work that advances the understanding of crime little if at all. In the journal *Contemporary Crises* (which is now titled *Crime, Law and Social Change)*, Philip Jenkins derided *Crime and Human Nature* as a manifesto for Reagan-era criminal justice. In his review in the journal *Contemporary Sociology*, Lawrence Cohen suggested that “this book replaces the liberal biases of much contemporary criminology with the conservative ideology that has come to be associated with the authors” (p. 202).

By and large, the criminological response to Wilson and Herrnstein's work was to view it as an attack on the very fiber of criminology. This sentiment appears prominently in Jack Gibbs's review of the book in *Criminology*, the official journal of the American Society of Criminology. According to Gibbs (1985, p. 381),

> American sociologists tend to take a proprietary interest in criminology and to think of the leading theories about crime as “sociological.” Hence, Wilson and Herrnstein's tome (639 pages but only $22.95) may startle numerous sociologists, and those who suffer from high blood pressure should be cautious in reading it. Sociologists are accustomed to occasional forays by economists into criminology, but many will be unprepared for a flank attack by formidable scholars from political science (Wilson) and psychology (Herrnstein).

Based on the tone of these reviews, it is reasonable to conclude that *Crime and Human Nature* touched a nerve in the criminological community. Two overriding points are worth noting. First, Wilson and Herrnstein's treatise is frequently described as a deterministic theory of criminal behavior that is rooted in biology. However, many view *Crime and Human Nature* as less of a theory per se than a review of research from multiple fields that bear on human behavior and antisocial behavior. Indeed, Wilson and Herrnstein themselves would not even characterize their work as simple, deterministic, or singularly rooted in biology. For example, Herrnstein suggested, “Criminal behavior is behavior. It is not necessary to prove that human behavior is multiply determined, for it is obvious. Nothing we do, not even coughing or sneezing, has just one governing antecedent condition. The more complex the set of antecedent conditions, the less sense it makes to frame questions about behavior in terms of causes” (p. 62).

Second, *Crime and Human Nature* is more of a signaling call for criminologists to quit denying that individual-level constitutional variables are meaningful, but not exclusive, explanations for criminal and non-criminal behavior. Equally meaningful are other variables at criminologists' disposal, such as socialization processes, the stratification system, and culture. The consideration of both constitutional and environmental factors will help develop believable rationales for why some persons choose to repeatedly violate the social contract and why most persons behave lawfully (DeLisi, Conis, & Beaver, 2008).

The Contemporary Place of *Crime and Human Nature* in Criminological Theory and Criminological Research

According to Thomas Kuhn, a major indicator of the importance of a piece of scholarship is whether it signaled a paradigm shift in the way that science is conducted in a particular field. This clearly happened with *Crime and Human Nature*. The seriousness and, at times, viciousness with which criminologists received it are evidence that its ideas were at the time foreign to the ways that criminology as an academic discipline conceptualized and explained criminal behavior. In 1985, there was a clear preference for sociological **[p. 1017 ↓]** explanations that pointed to structural or societal factors as social forces that molded the thoughts and behaviors of individuals. Moreover, crime was believed to be caused by statuses that individuals occupied at various times, such as employment status or class position. The psychology of individuals, and certainly the inner-workings of their brains were believed to be irrelevant to crime and criminology. *Crime and Human Nature* changed all of that.

Although Wilson and Herrnstein bore the brunt of the criticism of a "new" criminology that embraced psychology and biology, other important works emerged in the years shortly after *Crime and Human Nature* that in essence carried the torch ignited by Wilson and Herrnstein. Thus, the low self-control construct in Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's *A General Theory of Crime* published in 1990 is similar in its assertion that self-control is the indispensible variable to explain crime. Although Gottfredson and

Hirschi were also criticized for their insistence that an individual-level construct was the essential predictor of crime, the criticism lacked the venom of that directed against Wilson and Herrnstein. Moreover, Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory has been repeatedly tested by criminologists who at least viewed its ideas as worthy of empirical scrutiny.

In 1993, another major work appeared which was in the same vein as *Crime and Human Nature* and that work was the developmental taxonomy theory presented by Terrie Moffitt and published in the journal *Psychological Review*. Moffitt's work explicitly incorporates ideas from neuroscience and neuropsychology to explain pathological criminal behavior among a small subgroup of offenders known as life-course-persistent offenders. Interestingly, although Moffitt's work is heavily imbued with biological and psychological concepts, it has been largely immune from the criticism that only sociology has something meaningful to say about the causes of crime. Thus, in just 8 years from 1985 to 1993, the use of biology and psychology (in conjunction with sociology) to explain crime morphed from controversial to accepted. Today this is even more the case, as life-course perspectives on crime routinely span the fields of pediatrics, child and adolescent psychiatry, developmental psychology, behavioral and molecular genetics, neuroscience, such as brain scans and neuro-imaging, public health and medicine, and many others.

Another predominant area of research in 21st-century criminology is the study of serious, violent, and chronic offenders also known as career criminals (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993). A major scholarly achievement of research in this area is to identify risk factors that are associated with recurrent, pathological criminal involvement and protective factors which can insulate individuals from getting into and leading lives of crime. This area also owes a debt of gratitude to Wilson and Herrnstein whose work zeroed in on the small group of criminals that are most damaging to society and examined the many ways that serious offenders are behaviorally different from non-offenders.

Finally, in the wake of the mapping of the human genome, scientists are each day producing insights on the ways that biological concepts, such as brain functioning and gene expression, interact with the environment to produce human behavior. Today, it is obvious that prosocial and antisocial behaviors, such as crime, are the outcome of a complex interaction between phenomena that are studied in a diverse range of fields

of inquiry. Today this realization is obvious and accepted. But not too long ago, such a viewpoint was controversial and Wilson and Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature* took a considerable drubbing for steering criminology away from sociology and onto a more inclusive, interdisciplinary course. For that, it is a lasting and important work in the criminological canon.

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See also

- Criminal Career Paradigm
- Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory
- Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray: Crime and the Bell Curve
- Moffitt, Terrie E.: A Developmental Model of Life-Course-Persistent Offending
- Neurology and Crime

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